

OLD FOR-EVER

OLD FOR-EVER

AN EPIC OF
BEYOND THE INDUS

BY

ALFRED OLLIVANT



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He that endureth to the end the same
shall be saved.

To

MY FRIENDS ON THE FRONTIER,

1911-1912:

THE POLITICALS WHO HELD THE KEYS OF THE PASSES;

THE SOLDIERS WHO GUARDED THEM;

THEIR WOMEN;

AND ALL THAT SHINING COMPANY,

WHOSE BRIGHTEST STARS

HAVE SINCE GONE DOWN FOR EVER

IN THE WEST.

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PART I

PANK'S PUNJABIS

CHAPTER I

LAD OLIVER

TOM OLIVER was an outstanding personality, even in that outstanding body of men and women who form the thin but efficient bulwark against the lean wolf-men roaming the hills in packs from the Malakand to Dera Ghazi Khan, and looking down with covetous eyes from their barren fastnesses on the provocative plains, shining with water, rich in beeves, yellow with corn, and teeming with loot and women. Over those sleek, river-laced lands successive waves of wolf-men have surged out of the ravenous North, century after century, from the passes which gave the Sikhs the cholera in the days of Ranjit Singh ; harrying, ravishing, and leaving their scars on the countryside up to the walls of Delhi.

When, for the first time in history, a counter-wave swept Northwards from the capital of the Moguls over the prostrate Punjab to the foot of the astounded hills, that wave was crested by white men, who established themselves forthwith like a wire fence, barbed too, between the tribesmen and their prey. *Our side the fence, law, order and security,* said the audacious

Feringhis. *Your side, go as you please.* And the white race succeeded under conditions which had baffled the Lion of the Punjab himself, and amid men who had scoffed at the Sikh Raj. Of the many great Frontiersmen of that first wave, in the days between the overthrow of the Khalsa Army and the Mutiny, the greatest alike in stature and personality was the black-bearded giant, John Nicholson.

As a merry stripling, Tom Oliver had ridden the Frontier from Bannu to Peshawar with the famous Deputy Commissioner in the days when the feeling between the officers of John Company and Queen's Service men ran to duelling point. He had accompanied his chief on his ride from Kohat, through the murky Pass to Peshawar, at the time the mysterious lotus-flower was being passed in secrecy and silence from native regiment to native regiment ; and had acted as Nicholson's A.D.C. when he succeeded Neville Chamberlain in the command of the Moveable Column that marched on Delhi after saving the Punjab.

Young Oliver had been beside his chief in the narrow lane by the Kabul Gate when, after the death of the gallant Jacob, the 1st Bengal Fusiliers wavered under a terrific fire from the roof-tops, and Nicholson sprang forward to rally them to a fresh assault on the Burn bastion. At the moment his leader fell, mortally wounded, young Oliver fell, too, at his side.

"Where's Lad?" was the constant question of the great soldier during his nine days'

death agony on the Ridge. And "Where's Lad?" were among the last words he muttered, blue-lipped, and faintly frothing, when at last death brought relief to one of the noblest of Englishmen.

To his chief, Tom Oliver had always been Lad ; and, to the Frontier, Lad he remained long after the last gleam of boyishness had vanished, and he had become the sombre soldier of ~~As~~-Indus legend, of a temper apt to keep the border marches and cope with the iron inhabitants of those iron hills. It was not till twenty years after the death of his first leader that his nickname changed.

The dun mountains that lie across the gate of the North, for all their air of deadness, are always a-flicker and not seldom a-blaze. Those blazes are sudden as explosions. A hush, a long-time smouldering, perhaps a faint eddy of smoke upon a ridge, then a sudden spurt of flame stabs the darkness, and fifty miles of Frontier is "up." Forthwith ensues a molt: eruption. Down a hundred gaunt hillsides turbulent lashkars of shaven-headed swordsmen and shaggy hill-men come tumbling like lava, under huge green banners, and inspired by Allah-intoxicated mullahs.

The origin of these eruptions is nearly always the same, as any Political who has been Agent in one of the passes and knows his job, will tell you. The mullahs get at the women in the name of God, as the

mullahs of most lands are wont to do. Thereafter the women approach their men daintily and with mocking smiles.

"You are not men," they say. "You are children. We will play with you no more till you have proved yourselves. Come back to us after a goodly slaughter of the infidels, and you will see what you will see. That is the will of Allah, which cannot be gainsaid."

The thwarted tribesmen then raid across the Frontier, inspired by the hope of a houris-peopled Paradise if they die, and of dutiful and docile wives if they live to return to the home-tower.

In the late seventies, when trouble was brewing all along the Afghan border, one such eruption, thus fomented, found Lad Oliver, now a Major in Pank's Punjabis, cut off at the wrong end, which is to say the Afghan end, of a pass. A runner slipped through with the news ; and the roar of volley-firing booming down the long defile told its own tale to the detachment at the right, which is to say, the British end of the pass. Those were the days when the heliograph had just come into use in the British Army. The officer in charge at the base signalled back to Kohat, the headquarters of the Punjab Frontier Force, that a company of his regiment had been isolated at Ali Khel, and was being swamped by Afghan regulars, aided by tribesmen under the Commander-in-Chief

in Khost, that merry fellow Faiz Mahomed Khan.

"Which company?" came the query from H.Q. "And who commands them?"

"The Jat Company: Major Oliver."

"Get in touch with him by helio."

"We have tried and failed. No sun his end of the pass apparently."

Later in the day, however, communication between the two posts was established for a moment between clouds.

"How long can you hold on?" asked the man at the base.

Back flashed the laconic reply—

"For ever."

CHAPTER II

THE GOD OF MAHARAJ SINGH

THENCEFORWARD, to the men of Chillianwallah and Sobraon and the Ridge, Tom Oliver might still be Young Lad ; to the rising generation he was Old For-ever.

The new name stuck, for it expressed the man. There was about it a hint of Cromwell and his Ironsides, chaunting as the mists rose, before the crowning mercy of Dunbar, *The Lord of Hosts my Shepherd is*, which rightly suggested the core of Puritan steel that was the fundamental characteristic of a soldier, simply religious after the manner of the older Mutiny men, Herbert Edwardes, Havelock, the Lawrences, and indeed of the majority of the members of the Punjab Commission of those far days.

Those who did not know Tom Oliver well attributed the hardness in him to incorrect causes. They said he was an Ishmael, and had gone the ordinary way of a disappointed man. It was not so. His silent and somewhat lonely habit of life were due rather to a temperament austere and almost monkish. Moreover his few intimates were aware that

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he had refused times without number both staff appointments and positions as a Political, pressed upon him, too, which would have put within his grasp the Commissionership of one of the two Frontier Divisions. He preferred to command the Jat company of Pank's Punjabis.

"I am a soldier," he always said. "And a regimental soldier."

In his own regiment it was maintained that no man knew Old For-ever who had not seen him in action with his Jats. Then the stern and solitary soldier of the Piffer Mess, who was never addressed in the way of chaff by his juniors, and rarely by his equals, unbent. He became genial first, and later radiant. By the time his penny whistle emerged from his pocket he was a boy jesting with his peers, a father merry amid his children.

"The Happy Warrior," young Apple Pippin, his subaltern, called him after the affair of Ali Khel.

At this time his face seen in profile, and inscribed by Cherry Wright for all to see amid less desirable works of art on the walls of the fort at Jamrood, was rocky as the Shutargardan: the nose with its bony promontory very pronounced, the long chin curling upwards, the hair just beginning to retreat from a forehead that sloped a thought too much. Colourless always as his hero, John Nicholson, he never tanned. His eyes

were blue, but not the fierce and vivid Saxon blue of that other great Frontiersman, Hodson of Hodson's Horse: rather a slate colour, that in certain moods took on the hue of smoked steel. Women remarked, not without surprise, that the note of them was not hardness but wistfulness. His hair, too, did not turn white, as did that of other men, beginning at the temples and spreading outwards: rather there descended upon it a fine mist of grey, in some lights almost invisible, in others like dew upon a lawn.

"There is music in that man and mysticism," said a great lady who saw him at Murree, and was fascinated by his face, and piqued by his avoidance of her.

"There *is* music of a simple kind," her host admitted grimly. "But we don't speak of it as music in the Frontier Force. We call it pip-squeak—Oliver's pip-squeak."

Old For-ever's penny-whistle had, indeed, long been a standing joke in the Piffers. It was not a penny-whistle really, much less was it a flute. It was a crude instrument, something between the two, that Oliver had picked up in a remote Waziri village in the Tochi, on one of those mysterious expeditions of his when he disappeared for weeks at a time into the hills with a Pathan orderly and a shot-gun. Once possessed of his toy he was never parted from it; and spent his happiest hours piping to himself, with gaps and gasps, familiar little tunes. In moments

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of stress it emerged as it were spontaneously from his pocket. During the affair of the fort, for instance, the thin strains of *Pop goes the Weasel* brought renewed strength to the hearts of his fainting Jats.

"Then the Major Sahib took out his pipe and made prayer to his god to come and help the brethren—even so!" the Jemadar of the Jat company told Maharaj Singh, describing the fight.

The Subadar-Major nodded his magnificent head.

"It is always so with the Major Sahib when the battle waxes," he said. "He calls upon his pipe—even so!—to the god of the Sahib log. And the god comes without fail." Priding himself upon his religious knowledge, the old Sikh added for the further enlightenment of his junior, "This God is one Lat Yusuf—Lat Crike Yusuf, who wrought miracles near Mecca in my father's time. Our gurus at Amritsar have told me of him."

"He is a fine god to fight," remarked the Jemadar, not without awe. "Did I not behold him at Ali Khel? I speak, Subadar-Major Sahib, as a small and foolish child."

"Of a truth he deals strong blows in the battle when the Major Sahib calls upon him," the Subadar-Major admitted, not without a touch of patronage. "But he is not the like of the god of Maharaj Singh." He departed, nodding majestically and tapping a

small wooden box he carried jealously beneath his arm.

In the estimate of the rank and file of Pank's Punjabis the Major Sahib's pipe had only one rival, worthy of the name, and that the god of the Subadar-Major. And as it chanced, Old For-ever had been responsible for the introduction of that idol, too, into the regiment. For to him, on the eve of his departure home on leave after the Ambela expedition, Maharaj Singh, then Subadar in the Sikh company, had come mysteriously by night, and asked with a certain hauteur born of shyness, after closing the door very carefully, whether the Major Sahib would do a commission for his servant in England.

Nothing would give the Major Sahib greater pleasure.

Then would the Major Sahib of his merciful kindness bring his servant when he came from England, the land of all power and all honour, the little god that lived in a box, and could be bought in Lonon, Piccalilly?

The Major would most gladly. But what sort of god was he, and how would the Major know him?

The Subadar of the Sikh company gathered confidence, but became more mysterious than ever, dropping his voice to a whisper.

"Behold, sahib! It is the god that leaps and peeps. The memsahib of Macpherson

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Sahib of the 4th Punjabi Mahomedans has one, and teaches her baba to pray to it."

Tom Oliver, standing in his shirt-sleeves amid half-packed cabin-trunks, listened with portentous gravity, but he could not for the life of him gather the nature of the god he was to buy. At last the Subadar, looking round him in despair, marked a match-box emptied of its contents, seized on it, and stuffed into it a scrap of tightly-rolled paper. Then he shut the box—and opened it suddenly. The rolled paper bobbed partially out of the box, and the Subadar made a dramatic backward movement of the head as if he had been struck in the face.

Old For-ever nodded solemnly. It was a favourite saying with him that every Asiatic is a baby. "And if we ever forget that we shall lose India," he would add. And perhaps part of the almost supernatural hold he had on his own men in particular, and the Indian generally, was due in no small measure to his recognition of that capital fact.

"This thing shall be done, Subadar Sahib," he said.

Six months later, on his return, he summoned Maharaj Singh, now Subadar-Major, and presented to him with some ceremony a small but perfect Jack-in-the-box with a very powerful spring.

The fine old Sikh with the cleft and curling beard, on his breast the Order of Merit, and a

row of medals, Frontier and Mutiny, trembled with emotion. His eyes glistened as he took up the box with reverent hand. Feeling for his slippers he backed salaaming out of the room, so moved that he could barely speak.

That evening Old For-ever had occasion to look in on him in his quarters.

There sat the Subadar-Major in solemn glory at a stripped table, on the centre of which reposed the god from Lonon, Piccalilly. All round clustered the other native officers.

"Wah! Wah! Subadar-Major Sahib!" they were saying in awed tones. "Kya hya! —(what is it?)"

"It is my God," the Subadar-Major answered majestically. "It is the god who leaps and peeps."

CHAPTER III

THE MULLAH OF DARGAI

WHEN he was a little over forty, Tom Oliver married a woman like unto himself, who seemed to have absorbed the quality of the hills amid which she had been bred. People were surprised ; but the most critical admitted that if Old For-ever must marry at all the only possible mate for him was the one he had chosen. The pair were curiously alike. Marion Granet was tall, athletic, taciturn ; and at a pinch had taken her husband's place on parade at the head of his Jats without detection, so the story went. She looked her best on horseback. From under the battered topi, which she wore with a chin-strap, eyes that were the hue of smoked steel in certain moods and certain lights, looked out and held you with the steady grip of a man's. You saw a firm long mouth, the lips slightly compressed, a strong chin, and a long bony face that was healthy for all its pallor. Her voice, too, like her husband's penny-whistle, popping out always in unexpected places, surprised you, so deep and rich it was as it issued from her lean chest.

There was music in it, too, of a rare quality, echoing.

People called her plain: no man certainly, and few women, ever spoke of her as ugly. *Une belle laide* perhaps, said the kind old Colonel of the regiment. When she married she was fifteen years her husband's junior, though few would have suspected it. Marion Granet was not a girl—and never had been; she was not a woman—and never would be: that was the general opinion. Throughout the Frontier Force she was known always as the Highlander, nobody knew quite why, seeing that she was English to the bone, of a good Yorkshire family. But the name was accepted, as such names are, because it fitted.

"Her father was a Granet, her mother a Block of Concrete," said the flippant jokers of the Force. The couple, indeed, had the reputation of being somewhat inhuman in their attitude towards each other and towards the world. But nothing really was known of them in the Piffers, and not a great deal even in the regiment. They entertained little, living very quietly in a pleasant bungalow, amid the peach and apricot orchards of Kohat with a stream running at the foot of the garden. It was known to all, however, that they lived for the regiment, and especially for the Jat company.

If ever there had been a doubt as to whether she was the right wife for Old

For-ever, Marion settled it when, as a bride, she killed her man, and that man, too, the Mullah of Dargai.

The Mullah, famous throughout Tirah for his own sake, was even better known as the father of Kadir, the Raider, the Terror of the Kohat Border. Kadir, though an Afridi, was a man like a Mahsud: valiant as he was treacherous, a schemer and politician, full of wiles and devilries. His mother was the daughter of the Khan of Saddah, half-way up the Kurram, between Thal and Parachinar. That was how he came to make of Saddah the base for his forays; and why Old For-ever was told off to carry out from Thal with his Jats reprisals on the village. It was after his son's hold had been burnt out, and his favourite wife's village razed, that the old Mullah of Dargai sent down five picked ghazis into the Kohat plain with orders to bag "the Kafir who trots like a camel, dead or alive." But the Pathan company of Pank's Punjabis were up to the wiles of their cousins, the men of Tirah, and bagged the ghazis instead. That delighted the Pathan company, who for long thereafter threw it up in the teeth of the Jats, with whom, as with the Sikhs, they had a long-standing feud, which had its origin in racial antipathy, and dated back to the raising of the regiment in the dark days of the Mutiny.

"These murderers were thy people," said the teased and surly Jats. "How should we

know how to deal with them?—In *our* country we know nothing of such swine."

The Pathans grinned and polished their teeth as they squatted on their hunkers.

"Well for the izzat of thy company that we were there to protect thine officer. Else had it gone ill with him, O oxen of the fat Punjab, who chew the cud and draw the plough and greatly sleep, and have neither eyes to see, nor ears to hear, nor nostrils to smell, when Death, like a striped tiger, stalks thy sahib."

"In *our* country we have no murderers," muttered the peasant-soldiers of the plains tatteredly. "We know not their ways. For we are not jackals who live in caves and sharpen their teeth on rocks on the bare hillside, where no corn can grow because God's curse is on it."

The simple fellows were anxious about their sahib, and not without cause. For it was known all along the Frontier, from Dera Ismail Khan to Fort Mackeson, that after his first failure the Mullah of Dargai, a stubborn old man and no coward, had sworn a great oath on the head of his son, Kadir, that his home and his tower should see him no more till he or the sahib who trotted like a camel had quitted the world; and, moreover, had come down from the hills to see what he could do himself for God and His Prophet. What he did, in fact, was to lie up in the culvert under the road that led from

the Olivers' bungalow to the lines ; and there lay up with him a tulwar, with a blade like a hawk's beak, and his trusted Snider, made in Deh-i-Afghan.

That was how he caught little Apple Pippin and Cherry Wright coming away from the Olivers' bungalow that Sunday evening, full of chaff, both lads unarmed, though well they knew the old Frontier saying—*Once beyond the Indus always carry a revolver after dusk.* The Highlander heard the first shot, and guessed at once who it was meant for: for she knew the story of the Mullah's oath. Also she heard just then, to her intense relief, her Tom pip-squeaking on his pipe, *Onward, Christian So-o-old-dears!* as was his custom on Sunday evening, and was glad. She snatched his Martini-Henry from its hiding-place, known to her alone of the household, and stalked with long strides down to the road, loading and clicking the breech-block home as she went.

When she reached the road the Mullah had already finished little Apple Pippin, who lay face down across the way in the new grey dittoes, of which he had been so delightfully self-conscious, and was finishing the other lad with his tulwar. Marion was a good, but by no means great, rifle-shot ; and in the scrimmage that was going on between the English lad, armed with his bare fists, and the steel-shod fanatic, few but her husband would have risked a shot. She ran

with long strides down the road towards the tumult. The Mullah heard the soft pad of her approach, and cut his victim down with the scream of some giant bird of prey. Then he turned to meet the new danger. What he saw staggered him. A woman was coming at him! He hesitated—and was lost.

Marion was standing in the middle of the road, loading again, with wary eyes on the three men strewn in the dust fifty yards in front, when her husband came leaping towards her, a naked sword in his hand, and his terriers tearing at his heels.

"Don't go up to him, Tom!" she called, never turning. "I'm not sure he's dead."

Old For-ever had considerably more experience in such matters than his bride.

He glanced at her face as he passed. She was steady as an iceberg heaving faintly in the long Atlantic swell, and much the colour of one. He touched her hand as he shot by.

"He's not dead, my dear," he said. "But he's done. You blotted him plumb through the chest."

He bent over the three men sprawling alongside each other in the road: the fair English lads in their neat Sunday suits from Jermyn Street splashed and shining with blood, and the old swordsman in his dingy white robes gasping out his life and clutching at his chest.

"He's scuppered the two boys," said Tom very quietly to his wife, who had followed him.

"There's not the ghost of a flicker in either of them." His anger was awful, so still it was and white. It made Marion tremble. She thought the wrath of God must be like that.

Then up galloped Jigger Jackson, the doctor, a little spluttering, black-moustached Eurasian, pock-pitted, in tight Jodhpores, who flung himself in a fury off his tat.

"Pork-butcher of Cawnpur!" he shouted in his broken Pushtu in the ear of the passing Mullah. "Hearken! When thou art dead thou shalt be sewn in the hide of a well-fatted sow, and thy body shall be preserved thus in spirits of alcohol in the museum at Peshawar, that any unbeliever from the bazaar may behold thy shame and make mock of thee for ever."

"The man's dying," said Marion briefly.

"I don't care if he is!" retorted Jigger, valiantly.

"You ought to!" snapped Old For-ever. "Shut up! We're English—some of us."

The dying ghazi's eyes wandered from face to face. Whether he understood what was passing, or only guessed the import, it is hard to say. He raised his hand to his forehead in some form of surly acknowledgement.

"O, Accursed, that trots like a camel, thou art a sahib even as is said among my people," he muttered. "But *thou*, Black Face and Badzat, art the son of a pariah bitch by a jackal that died of the foaming madness! *Thou* canst not harm me." He closed his eyes.

" My place in Paradise is sure as thine own in Jehannum. I have slain two infidels, and would that I had slain a third!—I have done well."

That unloosed the tongue of Old For-ever. He bent over the dying fanatic.

" Well hast thou done indeed! " he cried. " It is like a true Pathan and swordsman of the Prophet to slay two children, and attempt the slaughter of a woman, and then make boast of it!—Hearken, O Mullah!—For twenty years have I known the men of the tribes from the Suleiman Hills to Abbottabad, and have dwelt among them—Hazaras, Swatis, Mohmunds, Afridis, Orakzai, Zakka Khel. They have broken bread at my house, and I in their towers. We have been brothers of blood one day and enemies to the death the next. I have loved them and I have fought them. But always, whether friend or foe, I have respected them, because they were men and warriors. And never till now have I known even a treacherous Mahsud set out to the slaughter of women and children! "

The old man wiped the froth from his lips.

" As to the lads, thou liest, according as is the custom of thy race," he answered calmly. " These were not babes. They were man-grown, officer-sahibs, in the service of the Woman across the Black Water. Were they not with thee at Saddah that day? Did I not see them with mine own eyes

at the burning of the homes of my wife's people, and making sport, like young bulls, at the ravishing of our women?"

"Son of the Mother of Lies," replied the Englishman sternly. "Thou wast not in Saddah that day. Well I know where thou wast. Thou wast in thy tower, hiding behind the skirts of thy women, lest the rod of chastisement fall on thy back, too."

The transfrontier-man paid no heed. He hitched himself upon his elbow, and peered with glazing eyes at Marion.

"In the matter of the memsahib," he said, "I swear to thee by the Holy Kaaba that when my eye fell upon her as she came down the road, running even as thou runnest, O Accursed, with long strides like a trotting camel, I thought it was thyself disguised as a woman to escape the wrath of God and His Servant."

He fell back in the road, salaaming feebly to the white woman standing like a pillar at his feet.

The Englishman bent over him.

"I believe thee, O Mullah!" he said in the ear of the dying ghazi, and knelt at his side. "Is it thy will that I turn thy face to Mecca?"

The other signified fierce dissent.

"Touch me not, Accursed!" he muttered. "I shall sleep well. My son will avenge his father—even Kadir, whom men well call the Cruel, because he kills slowly." He was

fading rapidly, but the hate in him lived and flickered to the last. "Kadir has but one eye, but it can pierce the night, and see to the end of the world. And he has a heart that never forgets."

He closed eyes that glittered like a snake's, even in death. A look of content settled on his face. He passed.

CHAPTER IV

KADIR THE RAIDER

THE affair of the Mullah of Dargai was the beginning of a more serious and a bloodier business. The troubles with Sher Ali, the Amir of Afghanistan, long brewing, boiled over. General Roberts went up the Kurram, through Thal, with a column to deal with it ; and Pank's Punjabis went with him.

At Parachinar some of the leading khans came into camp to discuss with the Political Officer the question of keeping the lines of communication through the pass unraided.

Their leader was a tall, black-bearded man, with one eye and a slinking smile.

Old For-ever was standing in the door of his tent as he passed. The Pathan salaamed obsequiously.

"Who's your friend, Lad?" asked Warrior Pollok of the Sikh company.

"That's Kadir," answered the other.

Warrior showed genuine interest.

"What, the raider?"

"Yes ; he's the prime budmash of this part of the Frontier."

"He knows you!"

"I didn't know it till this moment. But I knew him—by his dead light."

"What's the story?"

Tom Oliver knocked out his pipe.

"He was torturing one of his wives. It's a little way of his. She stuck a kirpan into his eye—Kadir, the Cruel, his friends call him, I believe with reason."

Warrior grunted.

"What happened to her?"

The other shrugged.

"Don't ask."

Then Puffing Billy, attached to the regiment on probation in place of poor little Apple Pippin, inquired with boyish eagerness:

"Isn't Kadir the man whose father Mrs. Oliver . . ."

Warrior Pollok brought the boy up with a timely jolt of the elbow in the wind.

"Gas-bag-let!" he muttered. "D'you want all the Frontier to know?"

"He can't hear!" scoffed Puffing Billy. "He's squatting over there with the Political."

"Little boy," replied his senior, solemnly, "in the East every blade of grass can hear. That old moke in the road there with the bundle of rushes on his back is probably Kadir's secret agent."

It was noted that when the other khans quitted the camp after the jirga, Kadir the Raider stayed behind. As he, too, left, he passed Old For-ever at the roadside. The

one-eyed Pathan paused, and showed his huge yellow fangs.

"It is a great happiness for me to meet Huzur to-day," he said.

"May you never be tired, Kadir!" replied the other with cold courtesy, making use of the familiar Pathan greeting. "How goes it?—Hast thou engaged to see to it that the line of march of the Sirkar's troops shall not be troubled?"

"Of a certainty, sahib. Behold!" with a wave of his arm, "The like of this Army was never seen in these parts since the days of Timur the Terrible. Truly, the sahibs are a race of warriors."

He cast a furtive glance at the man above him, and remarked significantly in the tentative Oriental way:

"It is said among my people that even the memsahibs carry rifles!"

The tall Englishman stood on a mound just above the Pathan. His arms were folded, his face inscrutable.

"Lest their children be slain by budmashes, O Kadir," he replied.

The Pathan smiled.

"Huzur has a son?"

The soldier nodded in the direction of the brown tents of Pank's Punjabis.

"All these are my sons," he said.

Kadir the Raider laughed, and stole away up the hillside with long smooth strides.

The soldier sought out the Political Officer.

"Did you square 'em, Anak?" he asked.

"I think so. Kadir's taken 10,000 rupees to be good and keep things quiet."

"Why did he stay behind?"

The big Political in the rope-soled chaplis laughed.

"He wanted compensation for his father's death. Said that it now fell to him to keep his father's wives; and that he was a very poor man."

Old For-ever listened.

"Well?"

"I told him he'd made enough out of the sack of that Khosti caravan last winter to keep him going for some time; that two men were worth more than one; and that I wanted compensation from him for the mothers of the two lads his father slew."

The other nodded.

"What did he say?"

"He smiled—he always does; and prowled off."

The soldier lowered his voice.

"Straight now, Anak! Has he got a blood-feud against me over his father's death?"

The big man with the kind brown eyes mused.

"Frankly, Lad, I don't know. I sometimes wonder."

"Does he know who killed his father?"

"I think—mind, I'm not sure—but I *think* not. About a month ago, at Thal, he made one of his enigmatic remarks to me about memsahibs who carry rifles."

Old For-ever showed instant interest.

"O, he did, did he?"

"Yes, but it might have meant nothing.

Kadir the Raider moves in a mysterious way. I don't think myself the remark was aimed at Marion. They all know the old Mullah was killed by a memsahib. But I don't honestly think they know which memsahib. One of the other khans told me that before the old Mullah went ghazi he made his son swear a great oath with his face turned to Mecca and the Koran on his head, that he would avenge him if things went wrong."

Tom Oliver nodded.

"Thanks," he said, and departed, thoughtfully.

CHAPTER V

THE AFGHAN WAR

FORTY-EIGHT hours later, on the night-march to surprise the Spingawi Kotal at the head of the pass, where speed and secrecy were the essence of the operation, things did not go well. The pace was too slow, and there was straggling. Bobs rode up himself to the head of the column to find out what was amiss. The place of honour was held by a Punjabi regiment, accorded that distinction by reason of its record, which equalled, and, so it maintained, even surpassed that of Pank's. The Pathan companies were leading; and the Pathans were neighbours of, and akin to, the tribesmen about to be attacked. Bobs scented danger and summoned the Colonel, in whose ear as he went to the call a Sikh orderly whispered that there was treachery amid the Pathans. Just then a sepoy let off his rifle. The Jemadar did not fall the culprit out. Instantly Bobs halted the column and sent the 72nd Highlanders and Pank's Punjabis to take the lead.

The column got on the move again and swung briskly on its way. Towards dawn, as they

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neared their destination, Bobs turned to his A.D.C.:

"Go and see what's leading now," he said.

"Pank's Punjabis, sir," the answer came back.

"The Pathan company?"

"No, sir, Major Oliver and his Jats."

The little man on the big waler drew up at the side of the road, struck a match, and looked at his watch.

"Good," he said. "We shall do it."

They did.

At the storming of the Peiwar Kotal a few days later, and indeed through the campaign, Pank's Punjabis again did well.

When Bobs led them into Afghanistan with the Kabul Field Force to avenge the murder of Cavagnari, the British Envoy, and the massacre of the British Mission, they did better. Tom Oliver was now second-in-command.

In October the force occupied the Amir's capital. In the majestic Bala Hissar, arsenal and citadel, the scene of the last stand of Hamilton and his Guides, pockmarked still with the bullets of that great fight, and splashed with blood, the British General, in the presence of the chief Sirdars, addressed the assembled multitude from the steps of the Hall of Audience, and proclaimed its punishment to the guilty city.

Soon after the force moved out into Sherpur, the new cantonments prepared by the late Amir for his army.

Early in the winter telegraphic communication was fitfully established with India ; but heliographs between Landi Kotal at the head of the Khyber and the Afghan capital supplied a surer avenue of news. They winked all day. Tom Oliver, whenever he had a moment to spare, might be found standing on the flat roof of his quarters, his face to the East, and back to Kabul, watching those flashes. He was waiting news, and anxious ; everybody in the Force knew why. Then one afternoon one of Bobs' Ghurka orderlies came into the lines of the Punjabis. Forthwith the Colonel himself went over to the quarters of his second-in-command.

"Bobs wants to see you, Lad," he said, kindly.

"Now, sir?"

"I believe so."

Old For-ever went with set face. He had not liked the look in the Colonel's eyes. There was compassion in them.

"What's the trouble?" he said to the little Ghurka trotting at his side. "Mahomed Jan on the move?"

"I know not, sahib. I think the mem-sahib——"

The tall Englishman halted abruptly.

"She's not been killed?"

The little orderly looked at his feet like a brow-beaten schoolboy.

"I think, sahib. I do not know."

Tom Oliver marched into the General's room.

At once the other officers present vanished. The little man in the Balaclava whiskers and the big riding-boots rose gravely to greet the friend of twenty years.

"Well, Lad, old lad," he said, affectionately. "What is it, sir?" asked Oliver, almost abruptly.

There was a moment's pause.

"How was your wife when last you heard?"

"Well, sir—considering."

Bobs looked out of the window.

"I haven't very good news, Lad," he said, quietly. "Among the reports that came through this afternoon, quite unofficially, was this." He handed the other a slip of paper, on which he had written in his own hand the following message: *Reported from Kohat that Mrs. Oliver has died in child-bed.*

Old For-ever glanced at it.

"Do you know who the sender is?" he asked.

"Yes; Bartlett, of the Khyber column."

"Bart's reliable," said the other, gloomily.

"Usually," Bobs answered. "And I had the message repeated. But he reports it as a rumour only. It may not be confirmed."

Tom Oliver shook his head.

"It's true," he said. "I've killed my darling."

And he went out.

And that was the first sure intimation anybody had that there was something on earth Old For-ever loved better than his regiment and his Jats.

CHAPTER VI

THE DEH-I-MAZANG DEFILE

AFTER that Old For-ever went out into the darkness alone. And when he did that it was terrible, as the older men in the Force well knew. In the course of his service he had done it three times: once on the Ridge when they told him, sorely stricken himself, that he would never see John Nicholson again; once when a Pathan native officer, in whom he had trusted implicitly, sold him for a song in the Jowaki country; and once (unknown, this, to all but one) when Marion Granet first refused him.

The symbol of his going out thus was always of late years the same, and well-known to his brother-officers. He stuffed his penny-whistle away in his pocket; and the familiar pip-squeak was heard no more in the lines of the Punjabis. That was the outward and visible sign of the dying that was taking place within.

"What poor Old Lad wants to set him up is a touch of the real thing," said his Colonel. "A ruddy old rousing, red-hot fight."

And the Subadar-Major made the same remark with equal confidence.

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"The Major Sahib will emerge into the light like the sun from behind clouds when the battle is joined," he said, as he sat at the naked table on which was enthroned his god lolling out of his box in a somewhat dissipated way: for it was the hour of worship.

And it looked as if the cure might be forthcoming any day: for those were perilous times. Sherpur was a partially beleaguered city. There were daily forays, excursions, and alarms; and, behind them all, the shadow and the memory of that first fatal occupation of Kabul by a British Army, under Keane and Cotton, forty years before.

The Afghans, too, had not forgotten their success of those days against the same invaders. The aged Mullah, Mushk-i-Alam, who, as a young man, had seen the last stand of the little British Force at Gandamak—himself participating in that holy slaughter, and cutting down with his own hand the solitary survivor of heroic F battery—preached an impassioned *Jehad* throughout Kohistan; and the ladies of the deposed Yakub Khan lent powerful aid.

Early in December the Afghan Army took the field to do to the Feringhis what their fathers had done to Elphinstone's column in the Khurd-Kabul Pass in '42. Mahomed Jan advanced from Ghazni on the capital, with an army reported to be like the sea in multitude.

Bobs sent out three columns to meet him:

Baker and Macpherson with the infantry to the North, and a cavalry column, under Massy, along the Ghazni road. The hoped-for junction between the infantry and cavalry was not effected, and Mahomed Jan fell like an avalanche on the little cavalry force. When Bobs galloped up to the sound of the firing he found four Horse Artillery guns of Smith-Wyndham's battery and three hundred sabres, British and Indian, opposed to some ten thousand Afghan regulars and wild Ghilzais, coming over the plain like a tidal wave.

Bobs took in the situation in a glance. If Mahomed Jan's advancing swordsmen could be held up till Macpherson's belated infantry came up from behind the heights across the Chardeh valley, the little column would be saved and Kabul with it. If not, both were lost. Infantry were the dire need of the moment—infantry.

He sent back Hills at the gallop to Hugh Gough, with orders to dispatch infantry at full speed to cover the Deh-i-Mazang defile, through which the broken column must retreat. Five minutes after Hills galloped into Sherpur, the Jat company of Pank's Punjabis was issuing from Highlanders' Gate at the double, led by Old For-ever at his camel trot.

Maharaj Singh, for all his fifty odd years, strode along with the leading company like the hungry old lion he was; only the small bulge at his hip betraying to the fat Dogra Jemadar, panting at his heels, that the Subadar-

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Major Sahib had not forgotten his god in the hour of his regiment's peril.

It was two miles to the mouth of the tangi through the Asmai heights, and another half mile through the gorge.

From the moment Hills galloped into Sherpur to the moment Tom Oliver at the head of his Jats debouched from the defile on to the plain where the battle was being fought, was little more than half an hour.

Bobs came galloping up through the dust.

"Who are you?" he called in his high-pitched voice.

"Pank's Punjabis, sir," answered Old For-ever.

The little man peered through the dust.

"Is that Lad Oliver?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where *do* you spring from?"

"Sherpur, sir."

"You've come on wings then," said Bobs.

"And well for us. We've lost two guns. You must cover the retreat of the column, and then retire on Sherpur."

He pointed to a confusion of men and horses straggling through the dust towards the mouth of the defile.

"*That's* your job," he said. "Cover that."

"Very good, sir," answered Old For-ever; and turned to his heaving men. "Chal, baba!" he called quietly, waving them forward. "Come on, babies!" and advanced his company to meet the tumult.

It was not quite a rout, but it was mighty near one: his experienced eye told him that straightway.

"Steady, my sons!" he called, in his strong and confident voice, as he strode through the retiring troopers. "You've plenty of time. Give my fellows a chance to get through."

"God bless you, sorr!" shouted a wounded Irish cavalry-man.

"God help you!" muttered an English sergeant.

Lancers, Bengal and British, trailed by on beaten horses, the points of their lowered pennants bloody. Troopers who had been unhorsed in the fray tramped along in their heavy boots with the awkward duckling gait of dismounted cavalry, some tripping over their long swords, some still carrying their lances on their shoulders. Two artillery teams, without their guns, wounded men on the led horses, wounded men on the limbers, jogged hopelessly along. At the tail of the column a solitary Horse Artillery gun, unescorted, was firing case at the white-clad tribesmen advancing in waves, with flashing tulwars under banners, crimson, white, and green.

"It's a wonderful sight," said Old For-ever, with a gleam of quiet enthusiasm, as his company cleared the column—"wonderful!"

Just then there was a fierce and strenuous commotion in the detachment about the barking gun that was now the only thing between the Punjabis and the enemy—an isolated stub-

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born islet, waiting apparently upon the plain to be inundated. The gun rear-limbered up, and came through the Jats at a heavy trot.

"That's my last packet of sweets," said the subaltern, gaunt-eyed, but game, as he passed. "I can't do anything more but spit at em. Good luck, sir. And I wish you joy of your job."

He was gone into the dusty confusion from which Pank's Punjabis, that regiment of many races, was emerging, all in khaki, with swarthy faces and gleaming eyes, the Colonel on his bony Marwar charger towering above his marching men. Company by company the regiment extended and stretched athwart the line of Mahomed Jan's advance.

The old Colonel was killed in the hour of his pride, just as the movement was completed, and the regiment lay across the Ghazni road with their backs to the tangi and their left on the Kabul river. Then Old For-ever took command. The glow that had lighted him as he led his company through Highlanders' Gate was now a blaze. He was happy.

The men saw it, especially his Jats. They nudged each other, while the Ghurkas grinned, and the Sikhs licked their lips.

"The Major Sahib smiles."

"Verily he loves the battle."

"Our father is happy once again."

"He has come forth from behind the clouds like the sun after rain, even as said the Subadar-Major Sahib."

Then there was a chuckle all along the line.
The Major had taken out his old briar-pipe.

"Now he lights his little hukah."

"That has lain in the shadow of his pocket
since the darkness descended on him."

"Hark ye, my brothers! In a moment, if
these fellows come on, the little whistle that
cries like a baby will appear. It is I, Sher
Afzul from Yuzufzai, who say it."

The appearance of the infantry, and their
steadiness, had given pause to Mahomet Jan's
Army. They shouted insults across the way,
brandished their long knives, shook their
banners, but hung in their advance.

"They think we're the head of a brigade,"
said Tom Oliver to Warrior Pollok. "They'll
know we aren't when we begin to retire."

He waited till the dust in the defile told
him that the cavalry and the guns were
well away. Then, just as the sun was sinking
behind the hills, he began his retreat.

That is the critical moment, as every soldier
experienced in Oriental warfare knows. In all
trans-frontier fighting, so long as you are ad-
vancing, all goes well: for your wounded are
covered and can lie where they are till the
doolie-bearers come along and pick them up.
It is when the bugles sound the Retire that the
trouble begins. Then holds good the old
Frontier saying—*One man down means five
men out*: for you cannot leave your wounded
for their sakes, and you must not leave your
dead because of the izzat of the regiment.

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Now, as always, the signal to retire was the signal for the hawks to pounce.

The Afghan Army swept forward with a roar like a white-crested breaker to swamp that thin brown line, stretched like a piece of string, between them and their prey.

CHAPTER VII

THE RETIREMENT AT DUSK

IT is said that at the crisis of the Mutiny, when men were raising irregular corps out of the dust of the earth, and arming anything loyal that ever handled a broom, it was young Lad Oliver who first discovered the fighting capacity of the Jats, those simple Bocotians of the great peninsula, beloved of all, the butt of all, workers by nature, tillers of the soil, husbandmen by instinct and tradition, and warriors only when Necessity drives or Love calls.

Old For-ever always said himself that the fighting of his Jats reminded him of that of an English county regiment. It was more solid than showy, and none the less terrible for that.

"My fellows are what I call very *satisfactory* fighters," he once remarked in a rare moment of expansion.

It was perhaps because he had discovered them in his youth that he loved them so in his middle age. Certainly, it was because he loved them so, and well they knew it, that their fighting under him had long been a legend on the Frontier.

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A peasant above all else, yeoman and cultivator, the Jat is deep alike of chest and heart. He is shorter than the Sikh, and by no means so graceful. A true son of the soil, as the son of the soil is found all the world over, the Jat has no frills, no fal-lals, and is devoid alike of the swagger of the Sikh, the ferocity of the Pathan, the gaiety of the Ghurka. But for all that he is none the less to be dreaded when roused: for he has more than his share of the quality which above all others inspires confidence in a leader, whether in peace or war.

"There's only one man in Asia who's reliable," Tom Oliver would say. "And that man's the Jat."

As a fighting man, indeed, the Jat has the supreme characteristic: you cannot rattle him, for he has no nerves to rattle. "An uninspired fighter," the Sikh company commanders would complain. "But a dogged one," Old For-ever would retort. And he was right, too: for the Jat is at his best when put to the last test of the soldier—punishment during retreat.

Now, just before he gave the order to retire, the leader they loved so well walked along the line of the Jat company.

"Is it well, my children?" he called.

"Sahib, it is well," came the quiet answer all down the line.

Then the retirement began in *échelon* by com-

panies, the regiment always maintaining the same length of front to the advancing enemy.

On the left, resting upon the river, was the Sikh-Dogra double company ; then, in order, Pathan-Punjabi Mahomedans, Ghurka-Garhwals ; and on the right, extended across the Ghazni road, and bearing the main weight of the attack, the Jats.

Of them Tom Oliver was sure. He was happy, too, about the Sikhs upon the left. They were dancing on their toes, shouting defiance. Their blood was well up, for they had lost the Colonel whom they regarded as their own ; and it is only when the Sikh is cold that his metal shows a flaw. Moreover, they were facing hereditary enemies, from whom they might expect the exact measure of mercy they would themselves offer. The Pathans, on the other hand, gave him cause for uneasiness. Reckless in pursuit, when their faces are turned for home, and the pack is on their heels, the cis-Indus folk are never at their best. And they were facing men who were co-religionists and racially akin. Now, Old For-ever marked that already they were casting glances behind them and muttering among themselves. Warrior Pollok, however, striding among them, six feet five of him, with a chest like a ship's hold, and a laugh like an Olympian's, was holding them in an iron hand.

In fact, all went well.

Tom Oliver himself was always with the

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rear company of the moment, handling his men as a fine horseman handles a clean-bred horse.

At dusk, as they neared the defile, and the gap between the river and the road narrowed, he shortened his front of necessity, and sent word along to continue the movement down the gorge by companies from the left.

"My Jats and I will close the door," he said.

The Sikh company on the extreme left, thoroughly exhilarated now, demurred, saying that the Jats, as always, were going to have the pick of the fighting. It was only when the Subadar-Major, a Sikh like themselves, pointed out that to them had fallen the honour of bearing home the body of the old Colonel, while the Pathan company could not be trusted to lead the retreat down the defile, that they went. The other companies followed in succession, and disappeared into the pass.

Old For-ever watched the movement through his glasses. When he turned to find his two Jat orderlies standing between him and the enemy, with arms outstretched like wings, to cover him from the singing bullets, he smiled.

"As a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings," he murmured, and gave the order to retire.

The Sikhs, as it proved, were wrong that time. The thick of the fighting was over by the time the Jats turned their faces home. Mahomed Jan's men, it seemed, had had

enough. The pressure suddenly ceased ; and the main body of the enemy swept off across the river to take the Takht-i-Shah, whence they could threaten the Bala Hissar.

" Macpherson treading on their tail, I expect," said Tom Oliver.

He retired at his ease through the tangi in the growing dusk. There was no nagging, no sniping, even from the heights on either hand. As the Jat company emerged from the gorge, he pulled out his penny-whistle.

" And now a little harmony, I think," he said. And in a moment the slow and solemn strains of *Three Blind Mice* rose out of the night, with a good many halts and havers above the shuffle of the marching feet. So absorbed was the player that he did not see the little man on the curly-eared Kathiawar stallion standing on a mound beside the road with a lancer orderly, as the company marched past. It was not till the horseman spoke that Old For-ever was aware of his General's presence.

" Is that you, Lad ? "

The thin squeak stopped abruptly. The player, for once taken aback, thrust his pipe into his pocket alongside his revolver, with much the air of a boy caught cribbing.

" Yes, sir."

The horseman rode up alongside.

" You've saved the column. You've saved Kabul. You've saved the guns," said Bobs, huskily.

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"Not I, sir," Tom Oliver answered simply. "My Jats. To them give any glory—under God."

The little General started off at headlong speed for Sherpur, then pulled his horse suddenly on to his haunches, and came back under the brilliant night, feeling his pocket.

"I was forgetting," he said. "A dak's come in. There's a letter for you. I brought it along—in case you got through."

He handed a note; then striking a match and sheltering it in glowing hands, bent down from his saddle to light the man on foot.

Old For-ever glanced at the note.

"It's from Marion," he said.

In the darkness the little man above him gave a sigh of satisfaction.

"I thought so," he said, sheltering the match. "Won't you read it?"

The other pocketed the letter.

"When I get in, sir. Thank you. I'll tuck the men up first. They deserve it."

Bobs threw away the match with a little grunt.

"Queer fellow," he said. "Hardly human," and he was gone at a gallop into the night.

CHAPTER VIII

HOME

NOBODY who saw Pank's Punjabis, dusty, draggled, march into cantonments through Highlanders' Gate that evening, bringing with them the body of their Colonel, all their wounded, and many of their dead, are likely ever to forget it. The men of the garrison turned out to greet them ; and the survivors of the shattered cavalry column, horse-gunners, lancers, native cavalry, emerged from lines and hospitals and messes to cheer. The regiment took the ovation variously, that is to say, according to the company. The Sikhs brandished their rifles, and thundered with the glorious swagger of their race, *Granth ki jai!* (*Victory to the Granth!*) ; the Ghurkas showed their teeth and wagged their tails ; the Pathans yelled their battle-cry, '*La! 'la! 'la!*' ; while the rear company, the Jats, as always, shy, solid, and undemonstrative, hung their heads and glanced up furtively out of the corners of their eyes, to see whether the Major Sahib was satisfied. And there was no doubt he was. When they saw that, they broke into the happy laughter of a bevy of girls blessed by a beloved mother.

Hugh Gough, commanding the garrison of Sherpur, who knew of that note in Old For-ever's pocket, came up when the regiment had reached its lines.

"Won't you fall out, Lad?" he said. "And let some of us see your fellows to bed."

"Very good of you, sir," answered the other. "But I think I'll stand by. There may be a bit of trouble. We're an assorted lot, you know."

It was not till he had seen the men established that he retired to his own quarters. There, by the light of a wick floating in mustard-oil, he read the chit from Marion. It was brief, and ran:—

Darling.—Had a toughish time but am through now. Our boy is a fine lad and a fighter. He bites his mother daily to the best of his toothless ability. May God love you and keep you and the regiment.

The Subadar-Major, who as a lad had fought the sahibs at the crossing of the Sutlej and again later at the last stand of the Khalsa Army, under the walls of Gujerat, only to become as faithful a servant as he had been fierce opponent, coming to report that the sepoys of the Pathan company were unbuckling their belts to the Jats, while the Sikhs and Punjabi Mahomedans were taking sides according to their race and creed, with the merry Ghurkas bouncing about on the edge of the fray, found his new commanding

officer on his knees. Being the gentleman he was, old Maharaj Singh saluted the back of the kneeling sahib, and retired soft-footed as he had come ; leaving the other alone with his joy and his glory.

"I left the Major Sahib praying to *his* god," he told the Sikh Subadar with a little superior smile, as he tucked away his box under his arm. "And now I retire to give thanks to *mine*—who has given us the victory."

PART II
CHOLERA

CHAPTER IX

THE THREAT

WHEN at the end of the campaign Pank's Punjabis recrossed the Afghan border and marched down the Kurram back to Kohat, they dragged with them the old bronze muzzle-loader, lost at Gandamak forty years before, and retaken by them at the point of the bayonet at Charasiah.

On the last day's march into Thal, through that strange country where the shepherd herds his flock on the barren hillside, an iris behind his ear and a rifle on his shoulder, Old For-ever riding at the head of his regiment with Anak Murchison, the Political Officer, who had come out to meet him, was aware of a tribesman standing on a rock on a foothill some two hundred yards from the road.

"Kadir the Raider!" said Anak to his companion..

"Has he played the game?" asked the other.

"Pretty fair," Anak replied. "You're the last battalion to come through. We've had no trouble in the pass to speak of."

Old For-ever put his hand to his mouth.

"Shabash (bravo), Kadir!" he called.
"Thou hast kept thy troth."

There was a pause. Then the tall man on the rock replied:

"That is our Pathan way, sahib. An oath once taken must be fulfilled—be it to a man's father or even to the Feringhi."

He dropped suddenly out of sight, as though expecting a shot.

Tom Oliver turned to his comrade with a grin.

"A threat or impudence?" he asked.

Anak chuckled.

"Both, I guess," he said. "I paid him the last instalment of his subsidy this morning in Thal. So now, Kadir the Policeman makes his exit, and Kadir the Raider makes his bow. I shall look for trouble."

CHAPTER X

THE RETURN OF THE REGIMENT

THREE days later, when the regiment marched into Kohat, that honour was accorded them which had been accorded to the Guides alone twenty years before, when they returned to Peshawar at the end of the Mutiny. The garrison turned out to greet them, and a salute was fired.

The regiment marched between ranks of cheering soldiers back to its own lines, lugging its trophy with it. At the point where little Apple Pippin and Cherry Wright had been scuppered by the old Mullah on the eve of the campaign, the dusty column passed the Colonel's bungalow standing back from the road in an apricot orchard. On the verandah was Mrs. Oliver, a white bundle clasped in her arms.

The tall woman waved. But Old For-ever, riding doggedly by at the head of his regiment, pretended not to see.

Suet Thomsett, the adjutant, a married man of far greater experience than his Colonel, rode up from behind.

"Won't you fall out, sir?" he said, with a nervous giggle.

"When I need instructions from my officers as to how to behave I'll let you know, Captain Thomsett," snapped the other, and rode on inexorably in the dust.

But if the Colonel would pay no attention to the wife he had not seen for a year, and the child he had never seen, the men more than made up for it.

"It is the Colonel's memsahib!" they said among themselves.

"And the Chota Sahib!"

"Yea. Hast thou not heard, brother? The Colonel Sahib has a son."

"Who will command the regiment some day?"

"Let us give the war-cry of the Khalsa, O Chosen Ones!—It will cheer the little one upon his way."

"Well spoken, Man Singh!—It will make a warrior of him like unto his father before him."

Then Maharaj Singh, the Subadar-Major, with his fine instinct for the feeling of the regiment, and his sense of the dramatically appropriate, turned, and walking backwards for a few steps, keeping pace as he did so with the marching men, drew his sword with a magnificent flourish.

"Ho, brothers, let us shout!"

So the Sikh company who were leading started it; and after that Pathans, Punjabi Mahomedans, Ghurkas, Jats, company after company, turned their faces to the left and gave the war-cry peculiar to their race as they

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passed the memsahib standing in the verandah a head and shoulders above her ayah.

"I felt like the Queen," said Marion afterwards.

It was not till the evening that Tom Oliver tramped back to the bungalow alone.

His wife came down the garden-path to meet him, her baby in her arms. She walked proudly, and with glistening eyes.

Old For-ever quickened his pace. He was trembling and confused.

"Well, Marion," he said, huskily.

"Tom," she answered, deep and quivering, and lifted the lace from the face of the sleeping child. "Our baba!"

Her husband peeped quickly as at something not quite proper. Then, his duty done, he withdrew his eyes.

"Very nice," he said, and added by way of making conversation. "What ye call him?"

"My dear, he hasn't been christened yet."

"Hasn't he?" said Old For-ever, obviously shocked. "Why not?"

Marion laughed.

"I was waiting for his father."

Tom smiled.

"I see," he said. "Well, what *are* we to call him?"

"Frederick Roberts, of course," answered Marion firmly. "Known to his father and mother as Bobs."

Old For-ever nodded.

"The little man will be pleased," he said.

"He *is* pleased," answered Marion. "He spared a minute on his way through to come and see me. Wasn't it nice of him? He *is* pleased, both with baby and with baby's father."

"With the regiment," her husband corrected her. "I must say I don't think it did him badly."

"And pleased with its Colonel—C.B.," said Marion.

Tom glanced at her swiftly.

"How nice of him!" he said, soft-eyed.

Back in the bungalow Marion handed her bundle to the ayah. Left alone with her husband, she stood before him, hands on hips, her long pale face glowing. She too was shy, but not so shy as he. Her natural angularity was lost for once in a subdued radiance, all the more challenging because of its reserve. Plump Pudden, the wife of the Brigadier at Kohat, was in the habit of saying that Marion Oliver had too much character. Her strength was her weakness. "There *are* such women—thank God. I love them. But they can be a nuisance on occasions. Marion's one of them."

But at this supreme moment it was not the sharp corners of her that were in evidence. Now she was a woman and a lover, thirsting for her man after long drought. The desert was about to bubble with springs, and the withered thorns to blossom into a

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beauty, all the lovelier because of the long winter of suppression.

"Take me in your arms, Tom," she whispered, her head falling on his shoulder.

Upon him too the miracle of spring descended.

He thawed, and quickened. His eyes were dark, with a tenderness that a few men but no woman save the one before him had ever seen in them. His shyness passed away as the mist on an April morning from an English field. He laughed.

"*Dear* old lass," he said, with a sigh of content, stroking her forehead and her hair, and tilting back her face.

CHAPTER XI

THE RAID ON PESHAWAR CITY

ANAK MURCHISON's prophecy came true more swiftly than even that experienced administrator had anticipated.

Three days after the arrival of Pank's Punjabis at Kohat, to rest on their laurels after their fiery ordeal in Afghanistan, Kadir raided Peshawar City and got away with a hundred thousand rupees' worth of loot, and the loss of only one man and a mule, killed in a nullah by a Border Police Patrol as the pack-train laden with the stuff beat its retreat into the hills at dawn.

The feat resounded all along the Frontier from the Black Mountain to the Gumal, as well it might. Kadir had flouted the British in their capital across the Indus. He had singed the beards of the sahibs with the impudent audacity of a Drake making a mock of the hidalgos of Spain. The like had never been known in Frontier history for cool effrontery. The raid, carried out almost with impunity, struck a shattering blow at the prestige of the British, while adding immensely to that of the successful hero of the raid, already a big man on the Border.

Three days after the news came through Anak Murchison rode into Kohat from Thal to consult with Tom Oliver.

Nor was his action surprising to anybody. For it was a matter of common knowledge that the soldier knew his Frontier, which is to say, his Trans-frontier, as did only Ruddy Gore himself, the famous Chief of the Peshawar Division.

About both men the most astonishing stories were current: that each of them in his youth, and Old For-ever well into middle age, was always over the Frontier picking up information, was never in doubt. But the stories told by Ruddy Gore were never quite believed; while the other's stories, which would have been believed, were never told. Not even Marion knew whether her husband had in fact tramped the hills from Wano to Landi Khana, disguised as a Powindah. His physique, bony and strong, made the feat possible, while his eyes might have passed as those of a Suleiman Khel. For him the language was no stumbling block. He had the trick of the Pathan tongue to a nicety; and the different shades of dialect, not so wide apart at worst as those of English counties, would have covered him as he wandered from tribe to tribe. Urdu, Pushtu, Hindi, Punjabi, and Persian—he possessed them all, and Pushtu idiomatically. He knew the proverbs of the tribesmen, their slang, and, most important of all, their jokes, racial

and inter-tribal, as did not even Ruddy Gore himself. The *Politicals*, profoundly jealous though the smaller men might be of his position, his long-standing intimacy with the truculent old Chief, and, above all, his *izzat*, admitted his authority amongst the tribesmen, and made use of it whenever possible. Ruddy Gore would strain every nerve to get him to sit on any *jirga* appointed to discuss with the Trans-frontier folk some troubulous boundary question that had been debated for thirty years. And when the tribesmen, a truce declared for the day from sunrise to sunset, came down from the flanks of the hills with looped-up garments and rifles under their arms, to sit in the plain among the boulders with the harassed villagers, the elders squatting in a circle round the little pile of tomes bound in sheepskins, the young bloods sprawling asleep or chatting behind, Old For-ever, by his intimate knowledge of the disputants and their history, would oil the wheels of controversy and set the train rolling peacewards with some entirely foolish little joke that would make even the ancients stroke their orange beards and laugh. The tribesmen trusted him as they did not even trust the Chief himself ; and his fame as a warrior was an incalculable asset amongst them. It was said that he was the one man in the Frontier Force who could give an Afridi recruit a hiding without fear of getting a knife in his back for his trouble ; and

that alone was testimony enough to his reputation amongst the tribes.

Now he and Anak had a lengthy consultation over pipes. The Political found at once that the soldier stoutly refused to believe that Kadir was responsible for the outrage.

"Look at the distance alone!" he said. "Peshawar's a good eighty miles from Dargai. And he could only get there at all by crossing the country of other tribes—Zakka Khel and what not."

Anak munched an apple.

"Kadir's the boy all right," he said. "No question about that. When he got back he sent down an insolent message to me to say that it was part of the blood-money he meant to exact for his father's death; and that he was only beginning. He'd been making his arrangements for months past. I've been able to track it out in part. First he sent a trusted follower into Peshawar City, who made pals with a harlot who lives on the city wall. This chap sent word back to Kadir, who trekked along the gorge of the Bara river with the mules, and lay up for a day and a night at Ilm Gudr, where, as you know, the Frontier's only five or six miles from Peshawar. After dark he crossed and parked his mules in the ditch under the city wall at the appointed place. His pal on the wall let down a rope ladder. Kadir and his bonnie boys scaled up into the city, barricaded both ends of the bazaar,

and set the barricades alight, so that neither police nor soldiers could get at 'em. Then they looted the place at their leisure by the light of the flames, lowered the stuff away to the men in the ditch under the city wall, who packed it on the mules, and bolted for the Border." He leaned back and laughed. "He's fairly got the chuckle over us. Made a fool of us both ways! Took our cash: then sacked our city."

"He's done for himself this time anyway," said Tom Oliver, chewing his pipe-stem and thinking hard.

"He don't mind that," Anak replied. "He's a schemer of vast ambitions. He wants to be the Napoleon of the Border, and he's on the way to it, too." He lifted kind eyes. "One thing though, old Lad. You and Marion can sleep easy in your beds now. He'll be outlawed for life. No fear of his showing his nose our side the Frontier again, except when he goes a-raiding."

"Unless he goes ghazi like the old man," mused the other.

Anak smiled.

"Kadir won't go ghazi. He's a Hajji and a Hafiz, done the trip to Mecca and the shrines and all the rest of it—but only because it pays. Politics is his game, not religion."

As the two men parted the soldier was still expressing his puzzled amazement.

"I can't understand what he's playing at,"

he said. "A long-headed fellow like Kadir to get the wrong side of us like that."

Anak admitted his own surprise.

"What's at the back of it beats me," he said. "But something is. Kadir's ruse as a Russian diplomatist."

Old For-ever put his pipe in his pocket.

"I shall take a few days leave and go across and see what I can see," he said.

"I wish you would," Anak replied. "Give Tirah a miss ; but if you could have a pow-wow with your old pal Ibrahim Khan we might learn something."

CHAPTER XII

ACROSS THE FRONTIER

IT was two days later that Watch-an Ward, the regimental doctor, profoundly aware that his Colonel ought to be suffering from war-strain even if he was not, ordered him away to Murree on long leave with his wife and baby. He ran up against a rock at once.

"I ain't a-goin," said Old For-ever curtly.

"Why not, sir?" asked Watch-an.

"It's too far. That's one reason. Why should I? that's another. I'm busy. That's a third. And there's trouble brewing. That's a fourth."

The doctor looked up astonished.

"Trouble brewing, sir?" he said. "I thought the trouble was behind us."

"So it is," his Colonel answered—"and in front of us, too. There's always trouble on the Frontier. Else we shouldn't be here. Look at this Kadir business! Besides, the Subadar-Major informed me this morning that his god was prophesying woe; and he's in the blackest blues accordingly."

"If there's trouble coming, sir, you'd best be out of it," said Watch-an, who was

more famous for his devotion than his tact.
" You've had more than your fair share."

It was an unfortunate debating point to make.

Old For-ever gloomed, as was his way when about to launch one of his sardonic thunder-bolts.

" I see, Dr. Ward," he said. " When there's trouble in a regiment the Colonel's first duty is to bolt! "

The long doctor shouldered awkwardly about realizing his blunder.

" I've made my point abominably, sir, as I always do. It's a good point, none the less. It is that you want a complete change. You're suffering from war-strain. You must be —after these two years."

" I'm nothing of the sort," retorted the other.

The doctor, who liked to have his own way as much as his Colonel, appealed to Mrs. Oliver, but got little help from her.

" Tom must do what he likes," she said.
" If he won't, he won't. It's no good talking."

And Tom wouldn't ; advancing a multitude of reasons, mainly schoolboyish, for his refusal: he wouldn't be dictated to by old Watch-an or anybody else. He *had* thought he was Colonel of that regiment. It was all very well to say there was peace now ; but there wasn't. Afghanistan might be *down*, but the Frontier was *up*—or on the verge of it. That was *his* information ; and he meant to confirm it himself the first leave

he took. No other change did he need or would he have. Watch-an could go and cut his throat—so long as he didn't do it in the lines of Pank's Punjabis.

When the whisper went round the officers of Pank's that the Colonel was "going across" again, Maharaj Singh presented himself before his C.O. as he had done any time these twenty years, whenever this particular rumour was abroad.

The Subadar-Major had a humble request to make. He asked permission to accompany Huzur, seeing that there was danger in the affair and honour.

His Colonel met him with amused eyes.

"Who told thee that I was going on any such madcap expedition, Subadar-Major Sahib?"

Maharaj Singh tapped the precious box under his arm.

"My god, sahib—he who knows all."

The omniscience of the Subadar-Major's god was notorious throughout the regiment, and belief in it to be encouraged, because it was a source of considerable strength in the maintenance of discipline.

"It is not well that this thing should be known, Subadar-Major Sahib," his Colonel continued gravely.

"Of a surety it is *not* well, sahib. And none know it but my god and me: For he has made deaf the brethren to the winds of rumour."

Old For-ever shook his head.

"I cannot take thee, Subadar-Major Sahib." The other clasped his hands in intercession.

"For twenty years has thy servant made prayer to thee in this matter, sahib; and to-day more vehemently than ever. It is not good that the Colonel of Pank's Punjabis should cross the Frontier alone in these days when trouble is a-foot."

"It is better that he should go alone than with one of *thy* race, Subadar-Major Sahib," replied Old For-ever grimly.

Maharaj Singh was renowned for his courage, and deservedly. He was said to be the only Sikh in the Piffers who time and again had himself gone across alone. And certainly each time he did it he took his life in his hand. For Frontier memories are long; and the days when the Sikhs held Peshawar and essayed in vain to do what the British have done since by other methods, are not forgotten even to-day by either side.

"Eight times have I been across the Frontier alone, sahib," the old native officer reminded his Colonel: "five times in the service of the Sirkar, twice in a regimental matter—after the rifles, stolen to our shame, when the regiment lay at Jandola; and once on my own private business in the matter of a Suleiman Khel woman. They have not caught me yet."

"And well for thee, Subadar-Major Sahib," the other replied. "Maybe thou heardest what the Mahsuds did three months since to the

Jemadar of the 1st Patiala Sikhs they caught strolling at dusk two hundred yards from the Wano Post."

"I have heard it, sahib. But he was a child, and new to the Frontier; knowing nothing, like a babe, and thinking he knew all. But I!—have I not served here ever since the regiment first came to the Der-a-Jat, after we had hunted the rebels into the forests of Nepal at the time of the great Gadar."

His Colonel folded his arms.

"I will take thee with me on one condition, Subadar-Major Sahib."

"What is that, sahib?"

"That thou shavest thy head and abandonest thy quoit, so that men may take thee for a Pathan."

The old Sikh was rigid at once and grieved.

"It is not like the greatness of the sahib to make such a suggestion. For to do such a thing would be contrary to the Granth Sahib. I am a Nazarene, and may not cut my hair. The sahib knows it."

Then he saw the other had been teasing him, and smiled with splendid eyes.

"I know thee of old, sahib, and how thou lovest to torment thy servant. Now of a truth must thou take me with thee as recompense." The veteran was winning as a girl, shy, yet ardent in his appeal.

His Colonel made the sought-for amend.

"This once shall it be according to thy

wish, Subadar-Major Sahib," he said. " Because of thy good service for the regiment during the War I will take thee with me a little way."

He would not penetrate far—at least, while Maharaj Singh was with him, nor stay long: and the exploit would be good for the izzat of the Subadar-Major, and what was good for the izzat of the Subadar-Major was good for the regiment in the matter of discipline.

Maharaj Singh salaamed profoundly.

"Thou art my father and mother, even as thou art the father and mother of the regiment, Huzur," he said, and he sought his slippers with his feet. "All will be well, sahib. I will take my god with me. And if danger looms he will gather us under the shadow of his wings, as the partridge gathers her brood when the bustard hovers in the sky."

That was how Tom Oliver came to pass a week-end on the Samana with Maharaj Singh and a shot-gun. Every evening after the day's shikar the two men diverted themselves, each after his kind. The Colonel played dolefully upon his pipe, while the Subadar-Major produced his god from his pocket, placed it solemnly upon the ground before him, and put it through its solitary antic, while he sat opposite and studied it with the eyes and attitude of a devotee.

After two days Old For-ever sent his companion home—he had given the Subadar-Major plenty to swagger about—and moved on himself, with an Orakzai orderly into the Hassan Khel country. Then he dropped down from the hills to visit Ibrahim Khan who was the big man of the Kohat Pass, an old friend of his, and the father of a promising young Jemadar in the Pathan company of Pank's.

The old Khan was fat with a wart, a merry twinkle, and many wives, who were a little too much for him. In his youth he had been a notable wrestler: now he spent most of his day waddling about his village in slippers. Ruddy Gore once described him aptly enough as the Falstaff of the Border.

When Old For-ever arrived at the village he was kept waiting for some time in the hujjra (rest-house) before the Khan came to visit him. That was unlike his hospitable old friend and bad manners.

A hujjra-man laid a gorgeous rezai (quilt) on a charpoy for the visitor. One of the smaller khans, a young man in a blue-embroidered waistcoat, came and played the host courteously. Apples, oranges, tea and spices were brought.

"Where then is Ibrahim Khan?" asked Old For-ever at last.

The deputy host smiled.

"He grows fat and old, sahib. His stomach sits upon his horse when he rides."

Just then Ibrahim Khan himself appeared, an earth-coloured Swati blanket cast about his shoulders, hobbling along down the village street, with fat bare arms, his creased brown insteps arching up out of curly-toed shoes.

Old For-ever noted a change in him at once. He was more surly, and less genial than of old. His wart was more in evidence, his twinkle less so. He had, in fact, a grievance against the Sirkar, which his guest in time drew out of him. The Government had paid big money to Kadir, the Raider, who was really from Tirah and not from the Kurram at all, for keeping open the Kurram during the War, and had paid *him* no additional subsidy for performing the same service in the Kohat Pass, though traffic from Peshawar had greatly increased owing to the War, entailing additional surveillance.

"And now, sahib, thou seest how this fellow had repaid the generosity of the British. He has made a fool of them in the sight of heaven as all men knew he would."

His guest admitted it.

"Truly spoken, O Ibrahim Khan."

It then appeared that the old Khan had a grievance of his own against the hero of the great raid, who had taken to wife a woman from his village against his wish, and that of her father, and had moreover forgotten to pay the bride-price although it was only a matter of 300 rupees.

"As much as that!" said Old For-ever.

"Yea, sahib. The price of women, like all things else, rises since the War."

His guest mused.

"I wonder she went with him—Kadir the Cruel!"

"She fled with him from her father's house because of his izzat as a raider, which was very great even before he sacked Peshawar City," Ibrahim Khan explained. "Such is the way of women! The young men of my village wanted to make war on the Afridis of Tirah because of it. But we elders sat in jirga, and said: *Nay; for they are too many for us.* So her father sent his son after her. But Kadir and the men of Dargai slew him. And that has made a blood-feud. But now, since the raid, Kadir has sent in word to me to say that the Prophet Himself has come to him in a dream, and bade him unite all the faithful against the infidel. And that is the will of Allah, he says."

His guest sucked at his pipe.

"Did he send the bride-price with the message?" he asked.

For the first time during the interview the old Khan's eyes twinkled, and he showed his toothless gums.

"I heard nothing of that, sahib." He stroked his henna-stained beard. "And when we are all one, no doubt, Shiah's and Sunnis, Turis and Afridis, Mahsuds and Mohmands, then, no doubt, will Kadir the Raider become our Badshah (emperor), and lead our hosts

to victory, and drive the enemies of the Prophet into the sea, like Jehangir in the old days." He spat. "Such foolishness!—Moreover, I notice than when the sahibs attacked the Amir of Afghanistan, who was a true follower of Islam, Kadir, the faithful, took money to keep the road open for them." He raised a fat finger and shook it at his guest. "But see thou, sahib!—This sacking of Peshawar City makes for mischief among the young men, who become restless because of it, and say among themselves—*If Kadir the Raider can do this thing and win great glory and much loot, why not we?*"

Next day, his mission fulfilled, Old For-ever returned to Kohat, and thereafter rode over to Thal to make his report to Anak Marchison.

"The Pass Afridis *are* on the boil," he said. "But I don't see Kadir and Ibrahim Khan making common cause against us at the moment."

"Good," said Anak. He took his pipe out of his mouth and said slowly—"Did Ibrahim Khan mention anything about Kadir's blood-feud against you?"

"No," answered Old For-ever. "Has he got one?"

The other paused.

"There are whispers," he said—"especially of late. I should watch it."

"I will," answered his friend.

CHAPTER XIII

PESHAWAR

IT was shortly after the shooting-trip that the tiff between Watch-an Ward and his Colonel ended to the satisfaction of both those stubborn controversialists.

Early in the New Year the District Superintendent of Police at Peshawar offered the Olivers a bungalow; and the offer was accepted. Peshawar was well within hail of Kohat, which pleased the Colonel; and it made a change, which satisfied the doctor. Old For-ever applied for, and was granted, two months' leave.

Because of the trouble among the tribesmen he decided not to take his party to Peshawar by the short cut through the Kohat Pass, the way he had ridden as a boy with Nicholson, but to go round the long tongue of jagged Afridi country which pierces the flank of the Frontier Province like a thorn, jutting out from the hills almost to the Indus, and forming a ragged barrier between the Peshawar valley and the setting sun.

"It's two sides of the triangle instead of cutting across the base," he said to his

Brigadier. "But it may be best with the baby."

"Best *for* the baby, I should say," remarked Plump Pudden, the Brigadier's wife, a grim old Frontier-hand.

"A man who rides through the Kohat at any time *may* be shot, Lad," said the Brigadier, quietly. "A man who takes his wife and baby that way just now *will* be shot at sight."

"Who by, sir?"

"His Brigadier, Lad."

Old For-ever bowed gallantly.

"Thank-you, sir," he said. "Fore-warned, fore-armed. I will go round by Khushalgarh."

Maharaj Singh came to the bungalow at the head of representatives of every rank, race, and company in the regiment, to see the party off; and as the tonga was on the point of moving the Subadar-Major gracefully slipped a wreath of marigolds over the head of his patient Colonel.

"We would crown the Chota Sahib, too," he said, "but we fear that might make for tears. May great honour be his!—And may he return to the regiment in health, and crowned with glory."

The tonga trotted off on its long journey amid the jeers of the Colonel's compatriots and the cheers of his men.

Old For-ever sat on the back-seat, alongside Marion, the child gurgling in his arms, the wreath about his neck, a somewhat foolish smile upon his lips.

To the hard-living men and women of our race who dwell beyond the Indus, Peshawar with its flesh-pots, few and unappetizing though they may be, is much what Piccadilly is to country cousins. But Peshawar is not Piccadilly as the monument to Mackeson, the Commissioner, assassinated by a Swati fanatic as he sat in his verandah, perpetually testifies. Yet the little Oliver party were almost foolishly happy there, and without fear or foreboding. To Old For-ever and his wife it was peace at last.

"It is a honeymoon plus a baby, which my dear, is heaven on earth for a woman," Marion wrote to Plump Pudden. "Tom just does nothing all day but play with Bobs, make love to me, and learn *Home, Sweet Home* on his pipe—a melancholy little ditty just suited to his genius. Lal Singh, our orderly, said to me the other day—*Heark, memsahib! The Colonel Sahib plays upon the little pipe. I think the trouble is coming once again.* Heaven forbid! Tom never goes down to the club. He seems content with an occasional day with the P.V.H., a bit of snipe-shooting, and a good deal of tennis. He grows quite fat—for him. Bobs couldn't be fatter, and bullies us all, especially Lal Singh."

The Peshawar folk were amused at Old For-ever's domestic ways.

"What d'you do all day, young Lad?" old Ruddy Gore, the famous Chief of the Division, asked him.

"Mostly nowt, sir."

"How does it suit you?"

"Fine."

"Old Lad's learning how to be a father," grinned Quentin of the Guides. "Young Bobs is teaching him."

Home, indeed, and daily communion with an affectionate woman and her child was softening the Colonel of Pank's Punjabis. He was growing young again. Not seldom now he unbent: sometimes he was even gay, developing a light-hearted humour that his contemporaries had always known was inherent in him, although scrupulously overlaid. And he spent much time at first surreptitiously, and later without shame, in attendance on his little son, "acquiring nursery," as he called it.

"I can now take a place as experienced nurse-maid," he wrote to his second-in-command. "I know what precious spices to put in his bath, and how to mix them—which is more than you do, Warrior; and how to make a fool of myself in such a way as to bring down the house every time. You should see Lal Singh's face when I do my world-renowned tea-cosy trick to order."

The hero of the Deh-i-mazang tangi, and a hundred other Frontier stories, would stand, a gaunt and somewhat saturnine figure, with the tea-cosy poised like a helmet on his head, and then let it topple slowly for-

ward over his bony face with a sudden *Ow!* Young Bobs, for whom this diversion was arranged what time he took his syrup of figs, thought this the funniest thing that ever happened. He would throw back his solid little head, thatched with fair hair, fine as silk, and laugh till the tears bedewed his crumpled face; while he gripped his spoon like a battle-axe and encored with loud bangings on his drum.

"Isn't it a funny dad?" his mother would say, growing almost madonna-like now, to the surprise of many, through excess of happiness, perhaps.

They made the perfect family trinity, the three in one, that is, and was, and always shall be, utterly content in themselves and each other.

"It may be a selfish life," Marion wrote home, "but it is a blissfully happy one."

On earth at that time there can have been few happier groups than that white man, woman, and child, living amid an alien people at the foot of those forbidding hills.

The three had a month of paradise. Then Lal Singh, the orderly, reported cholera at Kohat. The young Sikh was mysterious about it, and when put to the question by his Colonel sulked with hanging head like a schoolboy, and then burst into tears.

How had he heard?

He wouldn't say.

What regiment, if any, had got it?

Lal Singh didn't know.

"Khaisa aya," the lad blubbered. "Khaisa aya (Cholera has come)."

"It's probably just a bazaar rumour," said Marion.

Her husband, whose memories went back to the Mutiny, was not so confident.

"There's usually something at the back of Bazaar rumours," he muttered. At the same time he was not seriously uneasy: for the first thing that happens when a regiment goes down with cholera is that all the officers are recalled from leave, especially the C.O.

However, that evening, for the first time, he drove down to the club, and there found, as he had expected, the man he was after—the Chief.

Him he cross-questioned.

Yes: cholera had broken out at Kohat. But how bad it was Ruddy Gore couldn't say.

"You don't know if my regiment's all right, sir?"

"I don't, Lad. To tell you the truth, I know almost nothing myself. Your friends, the Pass Afridis, have held up the mail, and they, or the Hassan Khels, have cut the wire to Attock. What the trouble's all about I don't know. It may be just a back-wash from Kadir's coup. But the Pass is *up*."

His mind was on the political situation; that of the soldier on his regiment.

"Any news trickled through?" asked the latter.

"Nothing for forty-eight hours, except rumours galore."

"Bad?"

The other assented.

"Damn bad," he replied. "To judge from the talk in the city bazaar, as reported to me by the police, Kohat's like London during the brightest and best period of the plague."

"If you hear anything definite about my regiment I should be grateful if you would let me know, sir," said Old For-ever.

"I will," replied the other, and was as good as his word: for next day brought a chit to the bungalow—*Reported: Pank's Punjabis have moved out into camp.*

"What's that mean?" asked Marion.

"It may mean anything," her husband answered. "I suppose it means precaution only. Pollok's a sound fellow, not to be caught napping."

Pollok was his second-in-command, and Old For-ever had every confidence in him. But he was suspicious of Watch-an Ward, as his wife knew.

"Shall you go?" Marion asked him. She was aware of an uneasiness in her husband, more implicit than expressed. His answer, and the firmness of it, surprised her.

"No," he said. "Nobody knows anything much about cholera, except this: *that morale*

is everything. If a man thinks he's going down with it, down he does go and out too—in a couple of hours perhaps. It's the same with the herd. A regiment that rattles is done. Another crowd that keeps smiling will pull through. If it's touch-and-go now with our fellows, and Pollok and Ward are keeping the thing at bay by bluffing the men and lumping permanganate of potash down the wells, I might just upset the apple-cart by turning up suddenly. Like as not they'd say *The Colonel Sahib has returned. That is because there is no hope*, and turn their faces to the wall and go out by companies."

"Your Jats wouldn't," said Marion aggressively.

Her husband answered nothing. Now that he was Colonel he kept a jealous eye upon himself, lest he should give the mocker cause to accuse him of favouring his old company. That was why he had taken Lal Singh for orderly instead of a Jat. He was the regiment now, and not a company in it.

He sat down and wrote off instructions to Watch-an Ward to send him the daily "morning states" of the regiment by return, and to send them regularly in future. That action seemed to ease his mind.

"Puffing Billy's due to-morrow," he said, as he sealed the envelope and thumped it. "I shall wait anyway for his report."

Puffing Billy had just succeeded Suet

Thomsett as adjutant, and was coming over to spend a couple of nights with his Colonel.

"Perhaps he won't come," suggested Marion.

"If he don't I shall know what to think," replied her husband grimly.

CHAPTER XIV

PUFFING BILLY DOES NOT COME

PUFFING BILLY did *not* turn up. All the afternoon Old For-ever paced the verandah, looking down the road along which the adjutant should come.

"He may have been held up in the Pass," said Marion, disturbed at her husband's disturbance.

"Quite possible," Tom agreed. "One thing's sure: that way or no way for young Bill."

About that there could be no question. Puffing Billy would come Nicholson's way, through the Pass, or not at all. No sweating round by way of Khushalgarh, Attock, and the rest of it, for him, when he could cut across the base with a spice of danger to diversify the journey, and his bobbery, Waziri pony between his knees.

Even in these days the Kohat Pass is recognised as not too safe: an important official going that way is always given an escort, and more ordinary folk are warned not to dally en route. Forty years ago a man's chance of getting through was about even. And Puffing Billy had not got through.

"I hope to heaven they haven't scuppered the little beggar," his Colonel muttered, pacing restlessly up and down. Ever since the affair of Apple Pippin and Cherry Wright he had been nervous about his boys—downright silly about them, Plump Pudden maintained.

Marion was confident they had done nothing of the sort.

"His smile would disarm em," she said, briefly.

"His smile might do its best," her husband answered gloomily. "But seems to me it would take a fattish smile to stop an Enfield bullet with a soft nose, fired point-blank from behind a rock."

At tea, happily, Joey Elphinstone, the Deputy Commissioner of Peshawar, dropped in.

He jeered at the idea that the missing man had ever started.

"It would have been suicide," he said. "And that's against the Queen's Regulations."

"Is there a regular hold-up in the Pass?" Old For-ever asked.

"Something of the sort," the other answered. "I should describe things as a little more than just-the-same-as-usual. The Adam Khels are on the bobble. A blamed fool of a Hindu bunniah, one Lala, bought up a lot of stuff, Bokhara silk, Persian brocades, carpets, furs, turquoises, Russian pottery, from a Kizibash caravan as it came through the Tochi. He was one of the get-rich-quick boys, and instead of taking it down country at his leisure, like

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a fat man and a gentleman, he rushed it along the Frontier, and through the Pass, to get it to Peshawar before his blood brother, Chuni Ram, a little swine like unto himself and on the same ramp, could get through: for both men had heard there were a couple of big buyers come up here from native states—as they do at this time of year. In Lala's well-oiled bosom, blue funk and lust of gold fought a mighty battle; and lust of gold prevailed. Well, the short of it is that our dear brother and the stuff were nabbed in the Pass. Two days since he sent in a chit to say he was being tortured—which may or may not be true, Mrs. Oliver—and he must be ransomed in God's name at any cost; and with his chit was a courteous little note from his captors, pointing out that little Lala was a British subject, that they assessed his value at 10,000 rupees, and would we kindly send the cash?"

"Did you?" asked Marion.

Joey laughed ironically.

"Not quite. Ruddy Gore'd die of apoplexy at the mere suggestion. It would be absolutely against principles."

"What's happened?" asked Marion, pouring tea.

"Nothing—from our side," answered Joey. "I summoned all the bunniahs in the district this morning, and we had a prayer-meeting on the lawn, and I suggested that if they wanted to see their dear brother again

they'd better send the money, and sharp, too. At that they squealed like stuck pigs, and said that if you bled all the bunniah's in the Province white you wouldn't squeeze a tenth part of the sum out of them. I pointed to the gold ear-rings of the more aggressive, and suggested that they should dig about in their back-gardens and see if they didn't strike something that might help."

Old For-ever puffed.

"Who nabbed him?"

"Kadir—we believe."

The other laughed ironically.

"Kadir!—In the Pass!—All you men in the Peshawar Division have got Kadir on the brain it seems to me, since his coup. What on earth would Kadir be doing in the Pass?"

"What he's always doing," Joey replied calmly. "Building up his reputation as the world's greatest budmash."

"With Ibrahim Khan looking on and letting him loot *his* caravan in *his* territory!" mocked the soldier. "Likely! Old Ibrahim's far more likely to have looted it himself because of his grievance against the Sirkar in the matter of the subsidy. If I know my old pal aright he's not going to let any man poach on *his* preserves—much less Kadir. If you ask me, I don't believe Kadir'd dare show his nose in the Pass."

"Then why did he retire by the Pass after he'd raided Peshawar?" asked Joey.

That was news to Old For-ever, and sur-

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prising. Ibrahim Khan had breathed no word of it at their interview.

"Did he?" he said, honestly astonished. "I thought he went back the way he came—and that's the shortest way. Crossed the Border at Ilm Gadr, and home along the gorge of the Bara River."

Joey shook his head.

"He sent the stuff that way. But he made for the Pass himself. Dived in at Aimal Chabutra, and struck for home across through the Adam Khel country, kicking up the devil of a dust all the way."

Old For-ever nodded.

"I see," he said. "He was trailing his coat to put the pursuit off the scent, while the mules got away with the stuff. Good tactics, too!—But that don't convince me that he's returned to the Pass now, and is making of it a happy hunting-ground. Ibrahim Khan wouldn't permit it."

After his visitor's departure, Old For-ever returned to Marion. His thoughts were still with his regiment, and he was obviously cheered.

"No news is good news," he said. "After all, I *must* have been recalled before this if things had been going wrong."

Nevertheless, that evening he borrowed a pony, and rode out towards the Pass, in the vague hope of meeting his missing adjutant.

All he met, however, was a patrol of cavalry, the flicker of red in their pennants

betraying them as Guides, jogging back to Peshawar: grim troopers, lance at toe, their saddle-bags bulging, and forage-nets stuffed full. The subaltern in charge rode up to him a thought aggressively; then recognized his man, halted, and saluted.

"Coming back with us, sir?" he asked, tentatively.

"I don't mind if I do," said Old For-ever, and turned.

The boy seemed relieved.

"You see, sir, we've orders to hold up everything making for the Pass."

The other laughed.

"Oh, is that what you're up to?" he said. "Sir Rutherford Gore got the jumps! I was wondering what you were playing at. I thought perhaps you'd been looking up Mr. Lala."

"No, sir," the lad answered. "We're really out after a little lot of Boris, who are running rifles across the valley to the Bunerwals. Our information was that the party was due out of the Pass before sunset, and are to cross the Kabul river on mussocks somewhere about Shabkadr to-night. We've missed em. But we've got picquets out by the bridge of boats, near Tanab, and they may bag em."

"You didn't look into the Pass?"

"Well, sir, I put my nose inside to see if I could view Mr. Lala. But directly we were past the Fort and over the Border things began to buzz. And my orders were to peep, but

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on no account to buzz back. So I went fours about!—Kadir the Raider was making things a little bit too lively for this child."

Old For-ever eyed him sharply.

"What makes you think Kadir's in the Pass?" he asked.

"Why, sir, that Afridi duffadar on the chestnut got one through the lungi at close range. He said Kadir fired the shot. He swears he knows the ring of his rifle: he was in Peshawar City the night of the raid. And two of the other sowars confirmed him."

The other shook his head. Every native with whom he had talked over the raid appeared to have had a personal encounter with Kadir on the night in question.

"I can't believe he's in the Pass," he said. "Why should he be? And what's he doing there?" But he mentioned his missing adjutant not without misgivings.

"I was expecting him through this afternoon," he said.

The boy reassured him.

"He'd never have attempted to come," he said confidently. "A mouse couldn't have got through to-day, except with a brigade to escort it. The Pass is blocked in the middle, and corked at both ends. I'm one of the corks, so I ought to know."

Old For-ever was in better spirits that evening, as he dismounted at the bungalow, than he had been for forty-eight hours past.

"I think we're all right," he called cheerily to his wife. "If there'd been a catastrophe I *must* have heard by now. I know dear old Pudden. When cholera's around he's like a hen with a brood of chicks when a hawk's on the hover."

Marion, who was in the verandah, came down to him, a letter in her hand.

"It's from Kohat," she said. "Dr. Ward, I think."

Her husband took it, and tore it open eagerly.

"It's the states of the regiment," he said.

"Now we shall know."

The letter, indeed, contained a brief note from Watch-an Ward, but no "states." The doctor wrote that there had been sporadic cases of cholera in cantonments; and the 1st Pathans, who lay alongside them in the lines, had caught it *in waves*. "So we moved out into camp more to give the men something to think about than anything else. There is no need for you to come. We've got no trouble as yet to talk about."

"Well?" said Marion.

Her husband handed the note to her: he was grave.

"This isn't bad," said Marion.

The other brooded.

"Watch-an's a cunning liar," he said. "I know the old swine. He's playing a double game. You see, he's got this bee in his bonnet about my alleged war-strain; and he's mad keen for me to have my full whack of leave

undisturbed. That's what he's at." He took the note and pointed. "He carefully refrains from dating the letter. This may be forty-eight hours old or more. Then again that—*No trouble to talk about!* And he doesn't do what I particularly told him to do—send me the states of the regiment. I asked for figures: he sends me a sleeping draught." He paced up and down the room, quietly seething. "If he's been at his tricks, going round to the Brigadier, and feeding the old man up with the yarn that I must on no account be recalled, while the regiment's going through hell, I'll never forgive him—*never!*"

He was moved with the passion of the masterful man, who feels himself being thwarted. Marion saw it.

"What d'you make of it?" she asked.

"They're catching it," her husband answered, dogmatically. "That's my belief."

"What shall you do?"

"I shall go to-morrow, unless I hear something *definite* in the morning. As it is, I may have missed the critical time. It's the first forty-eight hours that counts in a cholera camp once it's raging."

"Whatever else it is, it isn't raging, Tom," said Marion, soothingly. "Dr. Ward couldn't write like that if it was."

"My belief he's lying to the world," muttered Old For-ever.

CHAPTER XV

RUDDY GORE

NEXT day, early, he went down to the seat of authority, and forced his way, without ceremony, past peons and scarlet chuprassis, into the presence of Sir Rutherford Gore.

"Any news for me, sir?" he asked, almost peremptorily.

The Chief scowled at him melodramatically over pince-nez, the silver rims of which served to throw up in relief his full-blooded and choleric face. He was a thick-set man, with almost hairless brows, now white, once the colour of tow, and eyes with a bull-like glare. He looked like a demagogue, and sprang, indeed, from the people. A man of big heart and big ideas, very close to the savage, and for that reason, perhaps, once a power on the Frontier, he was now past his prime, and retaining little more than the capacity for lurid language, which, as a young man, had earned him his well-deserved nick-name, and distinguished him from the other members of the Punjab Commission, fervent Evangelicals almost to a man.

A greater contrast between this red, round, full-fed man, squatting behind his table, and the tall athletic soldier standing before him, could hardly have been conceived.

Ruddy Gore, after a prolonged glare and stertorous breathing, as if he was about to burst, opened the ball characteristically:

"What the hell d'you mean by it?" he rumbled like round shot rolling between decks in a gale.

Old For-ever met the attack quite unruffled.

"Well, sir, perhaps I *was* a little uncermontous. But I had to get through to you. The matter's urgent."

The Chief rose, and waddled like a bear to the fire-place, turning a thick shoulder on the other.

"Get through to me! What ye talking about? I've just sent round to the General to put you under arrest." His neck swelled, and he roared, "*What the devil d'you mean by it?*"

"Mean by what, sir?"

"Trying to break the Pass last night. No bluff now!"

The man opposite him showed surprise.

"I never tried to break the Pass, sir!"

"Oh, yes, you did though," brutally. "I've just had a report from one of the patrols. Topham, of the Guides, caught you sneaking off there at sundown, and brought you back under escort."

Old For-ever's eyebrows raised.

"But what a liar the boy is!" he cried. "And so meek and mild with it, too. I was just out for an evening hack. . . ."

"Going hell-for-leather for Kohat when you were caught!" interrupted the Chief.

Old For-ever answered nothing. His silence seemed to affect the other, who ceased to bawl.

"Now look here, young Lad," he said more

soberly, " You know me—ought to, anyway, after all these years. That Pass is locked for the present, and I hold the key." His voice began to rise again. " *And I won't have you, or anybody else, break it. Savvy?* "

He grew calmer, and continued in a grumbling voice. " You'd get hung up for certain, and we should have to send in a Brigade and dig you out, as we did two years ago in the Malakand, when Sardine Thynne and Bacon Hogg got emselves nabbed. *And I won't do it.* Costing the country a few crores of rupees at the end of a ruinous war, and me my K.C.S.I.! " He waddled back to his desk, and relaxed slowly. " You can do one of two things. You can either sit here like a good boy, or you can go back to Kohat by the long route. It may take you a week or two, I warn you, because the Jowaki Afridis may hang you up a bit. But there's just one thing you can't do. *You can't cut home to Kohat through the Pass.* That's flat."

The old man had let off his steam, and was fast becoming his genial self. Old For-ever saw it, and seized his chance.

" My regiment, sir? " he said, mildly. " That's what I came about."

Ruddy Gore lowered himself laboriously into his chair again.

" Your blasted regiment! " he growled. " As if I didn't know that! Think I thought you came to have a crack with the Old Un? "

He puffed and scowled.

" Matter of fact, I was just going to send for

you when you came roaring in, howling for my blood. Of course, you'd have been lugged back a month ago if Pank's had been in tribulation. I know old Pudden. Hasn't got the guts of an albino bunny." He turned over some papers. "The 1st Pathans have caught it ; but you're all right so far. That's the short of it."

The man opposite him rose.

"That's cheering," he said, with a little sigh of relief ; and added, as he caught the flicker in the other's eye—"Well, you know what I mean, Old Un."

The other lifted a deprecatory hand as he sat back at ease.

"I know perfectly, Lad," he said. "Don't you worry to explain. There was a time that I remember well when the limits of the universe for Major Oliver were the limits of the Jat Company. Now your vision is extended to the horizon of Pank's Punjabis. Beyond your rotten old regiment nothing matters. The brigade at Kohat can be wiped out ; the Queen may die upon her throne ; and the bottom drop out of the British Empire. What's it matter to Old For-ever so long as Pank's Punjabis have had a good night ? "

The tall soldier bowed.

"I ignore your insults, sir, and *hope* your news may be more accurate than it usually is." He retired swiftly.

His cheerful insinuation, launched without sinister intention by way of reprisal, seemed, however, not to be as baseless as he would have wished. For on his return to the bungalow he

was to find, not for the first time in his experience of the East, that there was a direct conflict between the official message that came along the electric wire and the rumour that travelled God-knew-how.

Marion met him with the news that Lal Singh was in black despair.

"I think you'd better see him before he cuts his throat in the pudding-basin," she said. "He won't tell me, or the ayah, or the khansama."

The orderly, summoned, came reluctantly.

Now there are few more beautiful creatures upon earth than a proper young Sikh. He is smooth as a woman, lithe as a deer, and with the length and grace of a panther.

Lal Singh stood before his sahib, his beard soft and curly like lambs' wool, downcast as a girl, and wept.

His Colonel addressed him half-chaffing, half cheering, wholly kindly.

"What is it, Lal Singh?" came the quiet voice. "Hast thou had news from Amritsar?—Maybe thy little sister has fallen down the well; or thy mother become suddenly a widow?"

The lad shook his head, and sobbed.

"Then has some ill befallen the regiment? Tell me, Lal Singh."

The lad lifted his streaming face, and held out both hands as though in petition.

"Huzur, a terrible thing has come to pass. Thou and I are soldiers without a regiment. Death has passed and thrown the shadow of its wings upon the brethren. Pank's Punjabis are no more."

CHAPTER XVI

THE MAN ON THE CAMEL

THAT afternoon Old For-ever stood in the verandah and watched, his face to the South. He was in two minds, expecting something he knew not what. Amid the rocks under the verandah violets were blooming: and in the garden beneath him two convicts worked under a sepoy guard with fixed bayonet.

As he watched he was aware of a cloud of dust coming towards him down the road at speed. The sun was still high; and few travellers would be upon the road at that hour, and travelling at that pace, unless their need was urgent.

As the dust came nearer he marked the rhythmical come and go through the smother of it of dark knees moving like piston-rods, and high above them an ungainly nodding head, the chin thrust forward. It was a trotting camel, being pushed. He went indoors and got his glasses.

That camel was labouring. Old For-ever's experienced eye told him that it had come far, or fast, or maybe both. It was a huge beast too, and carried two men.

As it came nearer he saw that the camel-wallah had long black hair, that straggled wildly about his shoulders and a leather purse about his neck that flopped to the stride of his mount: an Afghan, probably, perhaps a Ghilzai. The face of the man behind, bobbing up and down at the shoulder of the foremost rider, he could not make out. At the gate the camel stopped with a sudden lurch and collapsed slowly in the road: a huge and sullen brute, mongrel-bred, muzzled, part hairy Baktrian, part Government oont, with somewhere in the remote past perhaps a stolen streak of Bikaneri raider to add quality.

Old For-ever in the verandah took all that in and marked with surprise that while the driver was not a sowar the double saddle was a regimental one and on the saddle-cloth was the crest and number of Skinner's Horse which, while not a Piffer regiment, lay alongside Pank's in Kohat temporarily, having come down with the column from Afghanistan.

The man riding pillion dismounted in haste, and came swiftly up the garden. A magnificent figure, his greying beard parted at the chin, curled and wisped up behind his ears, he made towards the house at a little trot, in his hand an unsheathed Afghan knife.

"My God! It's Maharaj Singh!" muttered Old For-ever harshly, and strode out to meet the Subadar-Major.

PART III

THE SUBADAR-MAJOR

CHAPTER XVII

THE FAKIR FROM KOHISTAN

THE old native officer slipped the long Afghan knife up his ample sleeve and came forward at a little stumbling trot, both hands stretched out to his Colonel like a child seeking succour. His temples were hollow, his face strained.

“Salaam, Huzur!” he panted.

“What is it, Subadar-Major Sahib!” called Old For-ever, advancing with a smile, his spirit as always rising to meet a call.

The veteran seized his Colonel’s hand in both of his and held it tremulously. His eyes were full of longing satisfied at last, of hope newborn. There was joy in them, and tears. Even so must the disciples have looked upon their lost Master when first they found Him after the Resurrection.

He was so moved that for a while he could not speak, and stood gripping the other’s hand, shaking it and quivering with emotion. He was shrunken too as though he had wilted away from physical exhaustion.

Tender as a lover, the Colonel drew the old Sikh’s hand through his arm and led him towards the bungalow.

"What is it, Subadar-Major Sahib?" he repeated gently, patting the other's hand. Maharaj Singh halted.

"Thy children need their father, sahib."

"Are they sick then?"

The Subadar-Major reviving fast, as though he drew strength from the other's touch, flung his arm in the direction of Kohat.

"They die, sahib—by platoons! The cholera has them by the throat. Three nights now—and last night worst of all. It creeps through the lines like a rock-python stealthily swallowing them, and all in order, as if arranged."

He laid his hand upon his heart.

"A fakir started it—the son, he says, of the old Mullah of Ghazni—may he never sleep in this world or the next!—He came through the Tochi into our lines in the patched gabardine of a dervish and beat his breast and prophesied. He said he had been sent by God with a message for Pank's Punjabis and that he had come across the hills all the way from Koh-dahman to deliver it; and that in Kabul the Amir had put out his eye with a red-hot wire to test the faith that was in him, but that when the Amir saw that he was not shaken in his purpose he had said—*Go in peace. Of a truth thou art a man of God even as thou sayest.* And he was a very tall man, and hairy, thin as a skeleton, his face powdered and a dab of yellow paint on his chest and forehead; and he had but one eye, even as he said, but dead was it from birth as a blind baby could

see, and he stood up in our midst, and cried out in a loud and lamentable voice—*Allah-il-Ullah!* And all the children gathered round to hear. And he said—*Hearken! This is the message that I, Abdul Aziz, the son of Din Mahomed, known to all the faithful as The-Scent-of-the-World, have been sent by the spirit of my father to deliver to Pank's Punjabis. There shall come a great wind, that is no other than the wind of Death. And it shall blow through the lines and shall strike every other man in every other tent on every other night till Pank's Punjabis is no more, because of the anger of the Lord for the slaying of the faithful in the Chardeh Valley at the Deh-i-mazang tangi. And no man shall be spared save only certain of the faith, whom God and His Prophet shall protect: for it is written in the Koran—The faithful thou shalt not slay. Also it is written that once in his life every follower of the Prophet shall be permitted to prefer mercy to justice and grace to duty. So now has dispensation been granted me, Abdul Aziz, the servant of the One God. Word came to me from on high as I prayed in the Jabbul Serai that He would deal lightly with the Musulman companies of the Regiment. Truly they shall not escape unscathed, for great has been their sin, but because they were blinded by the Kafirs with the dust of lies, and because at the time of the slaughter on the plains they fired high so that the bullets winged like birds above the heads of the faithful the anger of the Lord will pass gently over them.*"

The Subadar-Major made a sweeping motion with his arm.

"And he went thus as one who mows with a scythe at the time of harvest ; and continued—

For the unbelievers this shall be a camp of dead men, a place of feasting for vultures. And when the last man lies twisted in the death-agony that shall be the signal that the hour of the Lord has come. The faithful shall rise in their might ; and the Feringhis shall be driven like dust before the blast of Islam into the sea. They shall be dispersed like carded wool before the wind and like moths shall be scattered abroad.—And the children when they heard, muttered among themselves, and all those who were not themselves Mussulmin—the Sikhs, the Ghurkas, the Gahrwalis, and thy Jats—were very sad. But when it was told to the officers what was going on they came up in anger and put the man of God in kaid. But he only beat his breast and howled—*Allah-il-Ullah ! Crucify me head downwards an thou wilt. I have prophesied my prophecy even as I was bidden by God, and the spirit of my Father. And for all the cursings of the Accursed this thing that I have prophesied shall be.*"

The Subadar-Major sighed, and his eyes sought those of his Colonel, seeking reinforcement.

"And so it has proved, sahib—every other man, in every other tent, on every other night ; the first night a little, the next night worse, and last night—Ai ! Ai ! "

He covered his face with his hands, and bowed it earthwards, stopping his ears with long fine fingers, as though to blot out what he had seen and heard.

"It was not a camp: it was Jehannum." He withdrew his hands, and revealed a visage scarred and worn with anguish. "We were not a regiment, sahib; not Pank's Punjabis; not the warriors the garrison of Kohat turned out to honour when we returned from the War crowned with glory. It was a mob of madmen. The stricken men tottered out of their tents and tossed and tore themselves. They writhed like snakes in the death-agony. I saw a naik of the Pathan company in contortions that he could not control put his head under his knee and—click!" He flipped finger and thumb together. "He had broken his own neck. Ai! Ai! The crying and the wailing!" He pressed his hands to his ears. "The dead bodies of the Chosen lay about the lines in the moonlight like sheaves of cut corn at the harvest. Not since Chillian-wallah have I seen the like. And all night the living walked among the dead making lamentations or sat down in the tent-door, and cried like children."

He lifted his eyes.

"But from thy Jats, sahib, there came no sound! Ah, those be men. When stricken they set their teeth and died where they lay in their tents without a word. And no men knew of it till their brethren brought them out for the burning."

The Subadar-Major became grim and tense.

"And from the guard-tent came the voice of the fakir all the night through roaring like a hungry tiger—*Allah-il-Ullah!*—*Ho, brothers, did I not say it?*"

He dropped his voice.

"And when his howling went on I took my kirpan and went out of my tent. And outside I met the orderly of Pollok Sahib who had sent for me. So I went. And thou knowest, Huzur, how it is with Pollok Sahib in the hour of battle. He rejoices greatly. And the fiercer the fight the louder his laughter, so that the heart of the regiment swells within it; and he sends his spirit forth in happy bellowings like the voice of a young bull turned loose in the pasture among the heifers after long captivity." He shook his head. "But it was not so with him now. Pollok Sahib was clothed in heavy gloom like the face of the plains during the monsoon. He stood in his tent up against the tent-pole wearing the little drawers in which he runs, and on his head was the small velvet cap with the silver tassel which he won in battle when he led the English against the Scotch-log in his fierce youth; and in his hand was the hunting-knife with which he cut the throat of the great bison-ghaur with the chestnut mane that hangs in the mess. And he looked as I have never seen him look before in all our years of service together. Just then the fakir howled again his barbarous howl—*Allah-il-Ullah!* And of a truth his voice went through the camp like the wind

of death even as he said. Then spoke Pollok Sahib very short—*That man must be silenced, Subadar-Major Sahib. Come thou with me!* And I saw what was in his mind and pleaded with him. *Presence*, I said, *This is no matter for the sahibs. They must not soil their hands with such filth. Leave this to thy servant.* And he agreed, though reluctantly. So I went out to the tent of Jemadar Man Thaba of the Ghurka company and I whispered in his ear—*Come quickly, Man Thaba, and bring thy kukri. There is holy work to be done for the regiment.* So he came: for he too is very religious."

Maharaj Singh paused, dwelling clearly with relish on the memory.

"Thou knowest Man Thaba, sahib. He is short truly but built like a wild boar and mighty with his hands as the great African man-monkeys. Yea, I have seen him lift a horse from the ground by the fore-legs. Then we went quietly to the guard-tent whence the howling came. And there was no quarter-guard—they were dead maybe or watching their comrades die. So we crept in on the fakir who lay naked in the corner, like a panther caught in the pit who roars and lashes his tail but cannot escape. But when he saw us his howling ceased."

He nodded his head with gloomy satisfaction.

"At dawn the holy man died of the torment himself—may he be called to his account on the Day of Judgement!—and his body was burned at once with those of his race and creed

and all due rites, so that no questions would be asked. Myself I saw to it. . . . And while he was dying it gave Man Thaba and me great happiness to tell him that of all the companies it was the Pathan-Punjabi-Mahomedan double company that was suffering most." He lifted his eyes. "That was not true, sahib, but it was good for the Man of God to believe it, and maybe it made his dying easier."

He drew his hand across his tired eyes.

"Then Man Thaba took it himself. And as I stood beside the charpoy on which he lay he said to me, between the spasms—*My pain pays for my sin, Subadar-Major Sahib. This is the last drop of the cup of my penance for the man I killed when I was a lad.* For thou knowest, sahib, Man Thaba had slain his enemy in a brawl before he joined the regiment. And thereafter he found God and gave his life to doing penance. *And now at last I am at peace with my God,* said Man Thaba. *But as to the slaying of that sufi dervish that was good work, Subadar-Major Sahib, and a glory to the regiment—whom God protect.* And then he twisted till he died."

He sighed heavily.

"And that was how it was all the night through everywhere throughout the camp. It was terrible. And what could we do except walk about among the children and bid them be of great heart when our own hearts had turned to water within us? The Doctor Sahib is a great man, but he was helpless. . . ."

He paused, the vision of horror still haunting his haggard eyes.

"Then towards dawn the men came to us, a great company of them though as thou knowest, sahib, it is against the Queen's Regulations for sepoys to come to their officers in crowds, but see thou!—these were no longer soldiers: they were little children lost at night in the great bazaar and crying for their parents. And they stood before Pollok Sahib and wailed and made obeisance and cried out together—*Send for the Colonel Sahib! He will take this torment from us. He will not let this thing be. It will not pass till he returns. But when he comes it will fly away for fear because of his great anger when he sees the evil it has wrought his children. Send for the Colonel Sahib! He will drive the Evil One away with his little whistle on which he makes mantras even as he drove off the Afghan hordes with it at the Deh-i-mazang tangi.*"

Old For-ever looked up into the sky, his chest slowly heaving.

"I am coming Subadar-Major Sahib," he said, and led the old man away into the verandah. "Together will we go, thou and I, as often of old into the battle. And great will be our victory. But first must thou rest a little while: for thou and I are no longer what we were at the raising of the regiment by Pank Sahib on the ridge at Delhi in the days of the great Gadar (Mutiny)."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CAMEL-SOWAR

HE set a chair on the verandah and placed the veteran in it. Then he called the khitmagar to tell Lal Singh to bring food.

As the old native officer ate, his Colonel drew the rest of his story from him.

"How didst thou come, Subadar-Major Sahib?"

"Through the Pass, sahib."

Old For-ever nodded.

"Fortunate wert thou to get through."

"I rode for the regiment, sahib; and my God rode with me." He frowned portentously and tapped his pocket.

His Colonel made a motion of his head towards the long-haired camel-wallah who was gathering young tamarisk-shoots and feeding them to his evil-faced beast that lay in the road under a shishum tree, curling a supercilious lip and inflating a little pink air-bladder he had ejected from the corner of his mouth.

"He is a camel-wallah from Khost, who came through the Kurram last week with a caravan. I found him at the Post this side the Pass when I rode through and hired him." He ate de-

murely and with downward eyes ; and his manner was that of a cat who dines daintily off a favourite mouse. " He came smiling," he added.

Old For-ever watched his comrade's face with the faintly deprecatory grin of the man who knows he ought to protest but doesn't mean to.

" He looks it," he said. " Proud to serve the Sirkar, is it not so?—And it seems that before thou hiredst him with kind words, such as thou only hast the knowledge of, Subadar-Major Sahib, he had been into the lines of Skinner's Horse and helped himself to good loot. That new saddle with the brass-tipped pommel and the blue saddle-cloth were made at Cawnpur in the Government shops not so long ago and belonged to the Sirkar unless I was born blind."

Maharaj Singh was recovering, aided by the chaff of his Colonel, so familiar and so dear.

" Wah ! Wah ! that is a story, sahib." He held up both hands and pushed back from the table. " This morning when we had buried last night's dead, and soothed the men so that some even slept, the tears still on their faces, there was a council of the officers and it was agreed that thou shouldest be sent for. But the wire was cut. So—I will ride for him, says the Adjutant Sahib, *I, on my Waziri tat, the stroke of whose hoof is like the beat of an eagle's wing. And there is but one way, and that the shortest—through the Pass, straight as a loosed cheetah gallops after the black buck.—The Pass is closed!* says Thomsett Sahib.—I

care no damn! answers the Adjutant Sahib.
That is the way I go!"

The old Sikh swaggered.

"Then up rose Maharaj Singh and spoke.
Nay. Let the sahibs stay with the regiment.
They are needed here: for they are the stick
against which leans the pack of cards, and if
the stick is pulled up the cards fall down. Have
I not seen it a hundred times? It is I, even I,
the Subadar-Major who will ride. For one of
my race might get through the Pass, where the
sahib with his white face and topi would surely
be caught and slain. For if their watchmen
see me only from a tower on the far hillside
they may not take me for one of the Chosen
—a Sikh of Sikhs, and the son of a mahunt
from the Golden Temple itself. And so it was
 agreed. And the sahibs shook me by the hand;
 and Pollok Sahib said—*And God go with thee,*
Subadar-Major Sahib!

"So I went swiftly to my tent, and made my god leap from his box, and I bowed down and made prayer before him as always in the hour of peril." He lowered his voice and his eyes became shrewd. "For see thou, sahib!—Mine is a good god and sharif (a gentleman). But like a woman he needs caressing before he will give his best. So when I had soothed him and flattered him I put him back in his box and closed down the lid and hid him away preciously upon my person. . . ."

"Then I ran mightily into the lines of Skinner's Harruz, who too had come out in to

camp, though not yet afflicted. And I saw the Colonel and told him all and begged a trotting camel of him—they have four in that regiment for carrying despatches. *My regiment is dying, sahib*, I told him. *So I hear*, says their Colonel. *We need our Colonel*, I said. *Of course you do*, he answered. *Anything to help Pank's and Allah-faug-ecka*. And he orders out a camel and his sowar. *Chalo!* says the Colonel. *Chalo, bhai!* *Pank's Punjabis who were with us in the great march from Kabul to Kandahar, are brave men and they are dying*. And he claps his hands together, so. Then up came the camel-sowar, riding his beast. *The best man and the best camel I have got*, says the Colonel, and he caught me by the tunic. *I tell you, Subadar-Major Sahib, that camel is a Bikaneri raider that I bought myself from a Bikaneri last year at the Pushkar Mela.*"

Maharaj Singh's eyes, twinkling now, sought the face of his Colonel.

"So I saluted and said nothing: for thou and I, sahib, we know what the cavalry are. Then we started just before the heat of the day—up the kotal where the khud race is at the Brigade sports, and down the kotal, and along the Pass. And perhaps because it is whispered that Kadir the Raider is in the Pass, the tribesmen slept in their towers: for all went well save for one budmash who sniped us from far. But the range was too great, though he made good shooting and hit our camel on the hinder parts with a spent bullet that only added to the speed of

our going, so that for a brief space I almost came to believe that the camel *was* a Bikaneri raider even as the Colonel Sahib had said, so terribly did he swing his tail and curse in his throat. But that lasted no great while, for the camel was young ; and, moreover, this is the musht season of the year ; and the path was rocky. So he went delicately because his feet were soft and his heart also. Thus when we got through the Pass to the Fort at Aimal Chabutra, the sowar said *No further* ; and he dropped the rope on the camel's neck, and pulled no more on the nose-peg ; and the beast stopped willingly and the man got down.

"Then I argued with the fellow." His eyes flashed and he assumed, as few could more effectively, the air of the great gentleman.

"I told him the izzat of the Army and the honour of all Hind was at stake. But he was a stubborn rogue and saucy—a Pathan from Abazai. And thou knowest, sahib, we of the Khalsa do not like the Pathans, nor they us, since the days of Ranjit Singh, when the Sikh Raj stretched from Lahore to the mouth of the passes, and *my* people wrapped *his* in the hides of pigs and burnt their carcasses thus, to make their end sure in this world and the next. Also, they have much humour but no shame. So now this fellow said what did he care for the honour of all Hind seeing that he came from beyond the Indus ? And he said moreover that the feet of his camel were more to him than the izzat of the Indian Army. Then I would have struck the

soor, but as thou knowest, sahib, it is not well to strike a Pathan especially in his own country unless you have a bayonet party at your back. Therefore I reasoned with him as with an angry woman instead. But the fellow only shouted, *yea, he shouted at me, Subadar-Major of Pank's Punjabis, who wears the Order of Merit with one bar on my breast and five medals besides, and said—I tell you this camel belongs to Skinner's Harruz. He is a Bikaneri raider.* Then I said—*Thou liest, son of a dog. That camel was foaled at the Government camel-farm Lyallpur, and bears upon his quarter the brand of the Sirkar and the date of his foaling.* And I showed him. *But the soor answered me—That camel is a Bikaneri raider even as my Colonel told thee in my presence.* Then was I wroth and seized him by the lungi and shook him and shouted—*Hearken, donkey's dung! Knowest thou not that when the Colonel Sahib says a thing that thing is true, but when the camel-sowar says the same thing that is a lie!* ”

Old For-ever nodded gravely.

“ Truly spoken, Subadar-Major Sahib.”

The other continued with something of the naive pride of the schoolboy who has cheated successfully.

“ And I said *sowar* in such a way that it might be *soor* or it might not. And whether that annoyed him or not I cannot say. But the fellow told me that camels were not for the infantry at all: the infantry should go on foot: the camels were only for the cavalry, who were

badshahs (emperors). And thou knowest, sahib, how it is with these swine of rissala (cavalry). They think because they cannot walk on their own feet, and must be carried like corpses that they are the children of heaven ; and that the duty of the infantry on whom the burthen of the battle always falls is to trudge by in their dust and smell of their horse-stale."

His Colonel grunted understandingly.

" So the rogue said to me—*Of what use is a dead camel to us in Skinner's Harruz? If I bring back nothing but a camel's pelt to camp my Colonel will put Atta Mahomed in kaid and stop his batta. And that would not be good for Atta Mahomed.* After that I saw argument was of no avail and I despaired." He hung his head dramatically and then looked up with a mischievous smile. " But I forgot my god who had not forgotten me. For just then the havildar at the Fort, a Ludhiana Sikh, came forward and whispered in my ear that there was a camel-wallah from Khost lying up in the serai. So I went to see and found yonder sirwan. He had come down from Kabul through the Khyber with raisins for Peshawar and was taking back maunds of tea through the Kurram. And at first he said he would not come. So I pleaded with him and let him look in my eyes while I played with the knife I brought back as loot from his country. And after a time lo ! he came smiling and leading his camel."

" Well I know thy pleadings, O Maharaj

Singh ! " muttered his Colonel. " Have I not heard them in peace and war these twenty years ? "

The Subadar-Major continued his story.

" And so, sahib, we took the numnah and the regimental saddle off the Bikaneri raider, he and I, and pulled the stuffing and plucked it to make it ride easily, while the havildar and his sepoys pinned the sowar against the wall while he shouted terribly—*Zulm ! Zulm !* (Tyranny !) And then we mounted and I told the camel-sowar I would be back at dusk and would settle with him then and came swiftly."

His Colonel rose.

" And that was why thou rodest behind the camel-wallah, thy mouth at his ear and thy long knife at his throat." He patted the other upon the shoulder. " Thou hast done well as always, old comrade of battle."

CHAPTER XIX

MARION

THEN Marion entered.

She was dressed to ride and wore her battered topi. In her white stock, her long-waisted coat perfectly cut, and the habit looped to show her shining black boots, she made a lean athletic figure ; alert, almost defiant, a sword about to leap from its scabbard.

As she greeted the old native officer, her husband eyed her with secret admiration. Yes: he had chosen well. Was ever woman better fitted for the Frontier than the gaunt, game creature before him.

"My dear," he said, "it is as we feard. The regiment's catching it."

"So I guessed," she answered.

He led her to their room, and faced her there.

"I must go," he said.

"I'm ready," she answered, calmly.

He lifted his slate-coloured eyes to her's.

"I must go through the Pass," he said.

"Of course," she said. "That's shortest."

This was one of those occasions on which Plump Pudden's dictum that women with the character of Marion could be a nuisance might

be said to apply. But to her husband, her action and her attitude was no nuisance. Rather he was lifted up among the stars by her courage.

His eyes dwelling on her's shone softly. He did not argue with her, did not commend her ; but told her in brief the Subadar-Major's story.

" It seems coming in waves—alternate nights," he said. " As often happens there's a kind of rhythm about the cursed thing. They've had three nights now—slight, moderate, last night bad. To-night there should be a spell if all goes according to Cocker. To-morrow night it will either wipe out the regiment, or—"

" We shall hold it," said Marion.

" Yes," said her husband. " And what happens to-morrow *night* depends on what we can do to-morrow *day*—in inspiring the men. I must be with the regiment at reveille. In cholera morale's everything."

" Quite," said Marion, setting her long sensitive mouth obstinately and lifting her head like a stag awaiting opposition. " And so must Bobs and I—for the same reason."

That time even Old For-ever was startled.

" Bobs ! " he said.

" Yes," she answered, almost fiercely. " *In cholera morale is everything.*"

He walked to the window and looked out. Then, used to making surprising decisions swiftly, he came back to her.

" Thank-you, darling," he said, with a little

sigh, lifting her hand to his lips. " You're right. You always are."

In a flash he had seen with her eyes the vision glorious, which is always a vision of the Cross and Him who hangs upon it—to the world incomprehensible.

" When do we start? " asked Marion.

" We can't start before dusk, " her husband answered. " The road's patrolled. And if the Chief gets wind of what we're up to we shan't start at all. The old man's taking no risks."

" How far is it to the Fort at Aimal Chabutra? "

" Say twenty miles—and the worst road in Asia. If we start soon after sun-down we should be in the Pass before midnight. There's a full moon to see us through. It will be light as day by then, and a good job too." He looked at his watch. " That'll give Maharaj Singh a chance, too. He's fifty if he's an hour; and he's come forty mile in the heat of the day. A pretty plucky effort—through the Pass."

" You mean because the Pass is up? " said Marion.

" No, my dear. I meant because he's a Sikh. Our trans-frontier friends don't forget. They give the Sikh—when they catch him—exactly what they get from him—when he catches them. There isn't a pin to choose between them."

" Brutes both, " said Marion. " And a man like Maharaj Singh looks such a gentleman too! "

"So he is—up to a point," her husband replied. "But not a Christian gentleman. The Sikh's just as cruel as the Pathan. In every Frontier affair the officers of Sikh companies have to watch their men if there are wounded Pathans lying about. You can trust my Jats as you can trust Thomas Atkins. But the rest!" He shrugged.

Marion pondered.

"I wonder he got through," she said.

"If they're up, they probably thought he was a decoy. The solitary horseman or camel-man trailing his coat down a pass is one of the oldest ruses on the Frontier. They've been caught that way before."

He returned to the Subadar-Major, whom he found sitting gravely in the verandah with folded hands and the mystic's air, contemplating his god posed before him on the table in his little box with the lid open.

"The memsahib is coming with us, Subadar-Major Sahib," he announced.

Maharaj Singh showed his splendid teeth.

"I knew the memsahib would come," he said; "for I know the greatness of her heart. Did she not slay in single combat the old Mullah of Dargai, he who in an hour of darkness begot Kadir the Raider to be a curse to the Border? And did not I, Maharaj Singh, serve in the same column with her father, Granet Sahib of the 8th Pioneers in the Ambela Expedition?—All is arranged."

"Bobs Baba is coming too," said Old Forever.

The old native officer like his Colonel before him was staggered.

"Bobs Baba!" he cried, and struck his forehead with the palm of his hand as one stunned. Then understanding came to him. His face glowed; his eye lighted. With his gift for grand gesture at the right moment, he made as though to draw an imaginary sword, and waved it above his head.

"This is an inspiration from on high. We owe it to my god. I in my wooden-headedness had not thought of the Chota Sahib. But is he not his father's son?—Will he too not need to be with the regiment in which he was born in its hour of travail? Yea; and when the children see him they will be glad, and their hearts will grow great within them, and they will say among themselves—*Lo, the Colonel Sahib has brought his memsahib and his baba to be with us in the time of our dying to share our sorrows. Now verily are we saved.*"

"If it can be done?" said his Colonel tentatively.

The old Sikh waved all difficulties away.

"Easy as the flight of a bird, sahib," he said. "It is all a matter of *transpor—transpor*." He used the English word.

Old For-ever smiled. The phrase, a favourite of Bobs', had been a standing joke in the Kabul Field Force.

"At the far end of the Pass I have already made my bandobost," the Subadar-Major continued. "And at this end I go even now to make

it. And do thou, sahib, sleep whilst thou hast time. Thou hast full three hours before we take the road ; and there will be little sleep for thee and me this night."

His Colonel turned away. Old For-ever had this supreme quality of the great leader: when he knew his man he trusted him utterly.

"I leave all to thee, Subadar-Major Sahib," he said and dropped his voice. "But of this one thing I warn thee. It is not well that the Sirdar Sahib should know aught of our plans. Were he to hear that we were going through the Pass with the memsahib, then surely would he send rissala, and hale us back."

Maharaj Singh drew himself up. He had a private grudge of thirty years standing against the Chief.

"Sahib. I know the Sirdar Sahib of old. . . . Trust thy servant. I will walk delicately as an elephant."

The Subadar-Major's first service under the Sirkar had been with the Guides, his first commander Hodson. When that brilliant sabreur was removed from the command of his regiment under a cloud at the time of the Turner affair, men on the Frontier had been divided into two camps—the friends of the accused and his enemies. At the court of inquiry the young Sikh Jemadar had proved a fierce supporter of his old officer, Rutherford Gore the vehement accuser. Feeling ran high ; and only the outbreak of the Mutiny obscured the lesser in the greater issue.

Maharaj Singh was one of the men who, when the Guides marched into Barnard's camp on the ridge before Delhi, after their historic five hundred mile trek through the Punjab, broke ranks as they saw their late commander standing on the roadside watching his old regiment tramp past covered with dust and glory. A few months later he had stood for a moment at the bedside of the great Light Horseman, dying under the shadow of the accusation which had brought him low.

It was Rutherford Gore who had renewed the charge in a slightly altered form, and Maharaj Singh who had again rebutted it.

Neither man had forgotten or forgiven. . . .

Old For-ever left the room, and returned to his wife.

"I don't know what he's going to do," he said. "But I know Maharaj Singh well enough to know it will be done. Quite apart from the regiment, his desire to get back on the Chief would inspire him to heroic flights. Now I'm going to turn in. You'd better do the same, my dear."

"I hope Maharaj Singh will rest too," said Marion, as she took off her riding kit.

"My dear, don't you worry about him," replied her husband. "The Subadar-Major's a very old campaigner. He'll make young Lal Singh do any fagging that has to be done."

He looked out of the window as he folded his tie.

"There he goes now—haring it down the road, hard as he can pelt."

CHAPTER XX

RUDDY GORE AGAIN

MARION possessed the admirable soldier's knack of snatching sleep at a moment's notice. Her husband, who had the same faculty, lay for a moment listening with deep enjoyment to the breathing of the woman at his side, rhythmical as the sound of summer waves falling on a beach.

He was just dozing off himself when a hushed call roused him.

"Sahib!"

He listened. It was not the bearer, nor was the voice at the door or from the verandah. It came from within the house, at a little distance, and was both vehement and stealthy.

He rose quietly.

"I am here, Subadar-Major Sahib," he whispered.

He opened the door, and peeped out.

Maharaj Singh was in the room where his Colonel had left him, but standing now at the chik. There was a tenseness about his figure that betrayed the presence of an enemy. Old For-ever thought that the native officer's right hand clutched surreptitiously his kirpan.

On hearing the door open the Subadar-Major turned.

"The Sirdar Sahib!" he whispered.
"Hearken!"

At that moment, through the open window, there came the clattering of horses' feet trotting and cantering, and the gay jingle of bits and clank of accoutrements.

Old For-ever stole on stocking feet to the window, and looked out through the chik.

A barouche-landau with a pair of big Cleveland bays, looking curiously exotic in that environment, was drawing up in front of the bungalow. On the box sat a gorgeous chuprassi beside the coachman, and in the boot a similar pair. About the carriage was an escort of Bengal cavalry, lance at toe, fierce men, Sikhs, beautifully mounted and caparisoned. The turn-out represented by no means inadequately the power and majesty of the West, and in a form well calculated to impress the East.

Out of the carriage not without a certain solid dignity stepped the Chief, looking himself like the butt of an English oak, as his friends maintained, or a barrel of beer, as his enemies with equal conviction affirmed; but in either case, as neutrals pointed out, resembling something that was the symbol and the product of the country from which he sprang.

Old For-ever turned swiftly to Maharaj Singh.

"Don't let him see you, Subadar-Major

Sahib ! " he urged. " Send all the servants to the compound lest they drop mischievous words ! And do thou retire into that little room there ! " He pointed. " Myself I will meet and greet the Sirdar Sahib."

Maharaj Singh was still at the chik.

" The Sirdar Sahib is talking angry words to the camel-wallah in the road," he noted, with the eagerness of a child. " And that is well. Well also that the sirwan took the saddle off his beast, and sits upon the saddle-cloth and will not budge: for his tongue has become tied, and his heart stubborn within him, because of the arrowy words the Sirdar has shot into him."

The Chief, indeed, was shouting. But the Afghan might have been deaf as well as dumb for all the heed he paid. He sucked his hukah and never so much as turned his head, impassive as his beast that couched with protruding eyes and narrow jaws munching the tamarisk sprays spread before him.

The Subadar-Major watched with contented amusement.

" Of a truth it is well that the Sirdar Sahib roars at him like an angry lion," he whispered. " That makes for dumbness. To him all sahibs are Kafirs ; and all they that wear the Sirkar's uniform equally accursed—especially since the War."

He departed swiftly to do his Colonel's bidding.

The latter returned to his room, and standing

at the window, put on his collar and tie. As he did so he pulled up the chik and motioned peremptorily to the mali to be gone. The man had already gathered a button-hole of violets from the rocks under the verandah and was creeping up to the path to offer it to the Great Presence, and with it any information the Great Presence desired.

The gardener slunk away half pleased to be out of sight of the Burra Sahib and half aggrieved not to be permitted to make his obeisance and curry favour.

Old For-ever threw a swift glance along the verandah, and marked with satisfaction that the Subadar-Major, wary old veteran, had left behind him no evidence of his presence in the shape of slippers. The Chief moreover had his back turned towards the bungalow as he gave a curt order to the havildar in charge of the escort, who forthwith drove his charger up against the camel-wallah and began yelling at him and making threatening gestures with his sword. But it was clear that his horse feared the long-lipped snarling camel more than his master feared the havildar.

The Chief rolled up the path, growling and scowling.

Old For-ever went out to greet him, cool, tall, and cheery.

“ Hullo, sir!—An unexpected honour! ”

The Chief paused to look back at the scene between the eruptive havildar and the Afghan squatting imperturbable in the dust.

"What's that Khosti sirwan doing here?" he rumbled suspiciously.

The soldier peered over the other's head.

"That fellow!—Sitting in the shade of Furness's shisham tree and destroying his tamarisk hedge so far as I can see."

The Chief gave him the surly corner-wise glare of a baited bear, and shouted back to the havildar in Urdu:

"What's his story, havildar?"

"The son of a pig speaks only Pushtu, Huzur," the man answered. "I can get nothing from him: for I am a Sikh from the Doab, and know only Urdu and Punjabi, and such princely languages. I cannot talk this swine-talk."

"All right. I'll have a word with the fellow when I come out," muttered the Chief ominously. "I'll pluck the tongue out of him by the roots after the manner of Kadir the Raider."

He made towards the bungalow.

"A fellow came through the Pass on a trotting camel at noon," he said. "I thought that might be the chap."

Old For-ever looked demure.

"What *were* your patrols about to let him through?" he chaffed.

"*My* patrols! *My* patrols are all right, thank you!" snorted the Chief. "It's *your* patrols, the military patrols, that have messed the business again." He grunted. "What were they doing, quotha? Why, what cavalry patrols always are doing in my experience! lying on their backs on charpoys in the nearest hujra,

sucking down stolen ghee, and taking dustoorie from the lumbadars for turning their backs on what they're paid to see." He growled in a chest like a cavern—"Swabs of soldiers!"

His host took the insult with the utmost good-humour.

"Then who told you about the man on the trotting camel?"

"One of my own police inspectors of course. Who else? Rode in to tell me. I've got a party of punitive police stationed on Matanni. They've been playing up hell these months past—dacoity, murder, and I don't know what all. And now I've definite evidence that they aided and abetted Kadir at the time of the coup . . . helped him in and helped him out. So I've given em ten days' reprisals to see if that'll encourage em."

The soldier laughed.

"Kadir the Raider!" he mocked. "There's no getting away from him in the Peshawar Division these days."

The Chief put his arm through his friend's.

"Stop chucklin like a wood-pecker, Lad," he said. "Come on! Come in! I want to speak to ye. It's serious."

CHAPTER XXI

IBRAHIM KHAN

HE sat down, took out a cigar, and cut off the end, waving it.

“*She* don’t object?”

“No.”

“She’s a sensible woman like her father before her.” He puffed. “I liked Granet. He was a heavy Psalm-singer of course like all the rest of you in the Punjab Commission—except Ruddy.” He blinked rapidly. “I never coaxed so much as a ‘b’ from his lips, though God knows I tried hard enough for twenty years. And she’s the same.”

Old For-ever inclined his head.

“She never says ‘bloody,’ sir—at least, not to my knowledge.”

The Chief ruminated.

“He was a sahib—same as you. And same as you he thought he was a damn sight superior to a chap like me. And so he was. But he needn’t have shown it so.”

“He didn’t,” said his host, briefly.

The other removed his cigar and studied the smouldering tip moodily.

“There he goes—insultin me as usual. And

here I've got to come and kow-tow to him. That's why I got to stand em—the insults, I mean."

Tom Oliver lit his own pipe, and settled down.

"What's the trouble, Old Un?"

The Chief blew rings.

"This blamed bunniah, Lad. May Kadir the Raider smear him with kerosene and set him ablaze!"

"What's the matter with the blamed bunniah?"

"The Viceroy's the matter. About every other minute I get a wire from Calcutta about the little swine. It's seems he's in with a big native bank down country—either their agent or a member of the owning family or something. Anyway the bank's a power throughout Bengal and able to squeeze the Viceroy, who's squeezing me. I've had orders to win him back at all costs—get in touch with the Amir if necessary, and see if he can bring pressure to bear on the Pass Afridis; ask Murchison if the Afghan Governor of Khost can do anything, and I don't know what all. That's why I tackled the camel-wallah in the road. He looked to me like a Khosti and I thought I might find out from him who the Governor is now." He thrust out a crumpled telegram. "This is the last thing. It came in just as I was leaving."

The soldier studied the telegram gravely.

How much ransom do they want? it ran.

"What did you answer?"

"I replied—I don't know; and I'm not going to ask."

"Of course you're not going to," mused the other. "Where'd we be if once we started that sort of thing on the Frontier?"

"Where'd we be?" cried the Chief, and thumped the table. "I'll tell you just where we'd be, young Lad. The moment we'd banged the blood-money down we'd be in it up to the neck. Every bunniah in every village from the Derajat to the Malakand would be kidnapped and held for ransom."

Old For-ever nodded assent.

"Utterly unprincipled," he agreed.

"Of course it is. But what's Calcutta know or care about the Frontier—two thousand miles away. They tell me the very latest thing down there is to roll around all day in a victoria with india-rubber wheels to save the bumps. God help old England!"

The soldier pondered.

"Who's got him?"

The Chief paused a moment before he answered.

"Ibrahim Khan."

The other nodded.

"I thought so."

Ruddy Gore lifted an eye-lid at him.

"Pal o your's, ain't he?"

"Yes."

Ruddy Gore removed his cigar slowly, and prodded the sucked end in the direction of his friend.

"Of course. He knows every budmash on the Border. Always has."

" Ibrahim Khan's not a budmash," replied the soldier quietly. " He's a good fellow and a good sportsman with a delicious sense of humour and as near a gentleman as you can expect a Pathan to be. He's a raider on and off of course—got to be. A man must live, as he's often said to me. And if he can't live on his land he may have to live on his pickings. You should raise his subsidy, Old Un."

The Chief puffed.

" I shall stop it," he said.

Old For-ever knocked out his pipe.

" I should first catch your bunniah."

The other slewed heavily round to face him.

" How long have you known Ibrahim Khan? "

The soldier blinked thoughtfully.

" From the beginning. We'd a wrestling match outside his village. That was the year before the Mutiny."

Ruddy Gore showed a keen blue eye.

" Did he throw ye? "

Old For-ever wagged a pedagogic finger at the man opposite him.

" Now look here, Old Un! You think you're the only white man God ever made who knows his Frontier and his Pathan. You're not. *Do you really believe* I'd have been ' thick ' enough even as a boy to wrestle with a Pathan in public, even a big khan, unless I was dead sure I could put him down? "

The Chief snuffed.

" Put him down, did ye? A dog fa', I suppose, as we used to say in Cumberland when A was a yoong lad." He relapsed into the dialect

of his youth, as he did sometimes with his intimates even now.

The soldier got up and tapped his pipe against the mantelpiece. He was still schoolboy enough to resent the other's taunt.

"Fair and square Pathan wrestling—snatch, catch and hold," he said. "He stripped stark and oiled of course. I kept on my running drawers. We wrestled with the whole village sitting round in a big circle, the children standing naked beside their elders, the women in red chadars on the roof-tops, and a group of urchins perched on a huge camel for gallery. He proved a better man than I expected—and like an eel to hold. I tell you I sweated. I was young then and I felt the izzat of the British Empire hung on my victory. Well, I got my hold at last—and slung him."

The Chief chuckled.

"How did he take it?"

"Like a man—with a myriad self-justifications of course: I was armoured, while he was naked—he meant my pants. There was a jinn in my knickers and all the rest of it. But he did the gentlemanly thing: offered me a nautch-girl imported from Peshawar, etc."

The other's eyes glistened.

"Did ye take her?" keenly.

Old For-ever stared before him. The Chief drew hieroglyphics in the air with the end of his cigar and sighed.

"There's no mug like a bluggy mug as I've often said," he muttered. "But that was the beginning of your friendship with Ibrahim Khan,

was it?" The Chief bent his brows upon his vis-à-vis.

"And that's why Ibrahim Khan's son's a Jemadar in the Pathan Company of Pank's Punjabis?"

The soldier settled back in his chair.

"Who told you his son was in Pank's?"

"You didn't."

The Chief rose.

"Now listen you here, young Lad. I—am—going—to—squeeze—Ibrahim—Khan—by squeezing Ibrahim Khan's son till he squeals. I am going to jug Ibrahim Khan Junior till Ibrahim Khan Senior has unjugged little Lalla."

Old For-ever was up in a moment, flashing.

"*You'll* squeeze my Jemadar because his father's monkey'd!" he snorted. "You won't!"

Ruddy Gore sat down again, gurgling. He made digs towards the ceiling with his cigar.

"His rotten regiment!" he chuckled.

"Touch it with a feather and he's up, pup, pup! . . . There, there, Laddie! Perhaps I won't jug him. Perhaps I'll send him across to talk to dad instead."

"Not without my leave," replied the soldier. "It's not fair to the boy. He's eaten our salt, and he's loyal to us, and a promising lad. But he's only human and fond of the old man. And you must never try a Pathan too high." He put his hands behind him. "But I'll tell you what I'll do, Old Un. *I'll* go and see Ibrahim Khan myself—gladly." He glanced at his guest and laughed joyously. "Ha-ha! Now it's somebody else's turn to be up, pup, pup!"

CHAPTER XXII

THE RAIDER'S WIFE

THE Chief had swelled and purpled.

" You'll do nothing of the sort, young Lad," he roared. " What did I tell ye this morning? —No monkeying now! You're not a bottle-fed subaltern! You're a Colonel, C.B.! When old Pudden dies of apoplexy, or his missus more like, you'll get the Brigade at Kohat, and after that the Division here. If there's all this tamasha over a bunniah with a belly like me own what'd my life be worth if they collared the great Allah-faug-ecka, the man with such an izzat that even Kadir the Raider fears him." He rumbled ironically. " Then there would be a puka hooha! . . . And the first thing that would happen would be that your scoundrels in Pank's would break camp and go across after their precious Colonel with naked kukris and kirpans and cut the throats of every man, woman and child in the Pass—led by that picturesque scoundrel, Maharaj Singh."

The soldier met him squarely.

" You wouldn't call him that to his face," he said.

" I have before now."

"Then no wonder he thinks you're not a sahib."

Ruddy Gore settled in his shoulders and glowered. He was face to face with the one man on the Frontier who was not afraid of him.

"And so, young Oliver, you allow your Subadar-Major to tell you that the Chief of the Peshawar Division isn't a sahib!"

His opponent showed himself impenitent.

"I said *think*, Sir Rutherford Gore. Maharaj Singh's a gentleman—and the bravest man I've ever met."

Ruddy Gore blew rings of smoke.

"Bow-wow!" he muttered.

That annoyed the soldier.

"He led the assault on the Burn Bastion when Nicholson went down," he retorted sharply. "I don't forget that, whoever does."

"Not a bit of it," replied the other. "He was looting in the Chandni Chowk with Hodson at the time."

Old For-ever steadied himself. The only Frontier feud that never dies was breaking out afresh.

"Between ourselves, Old Un," he said calmly, "and in strictest confidence, you're a liar."

The Chief took the insult without a whimper.

"Blasted liar is what they usually call me, Lad," he commented philosophically. "But you always were more of a gentleman than the rest of em."

The soldier stood up.

"I saw Hodson in the thick of it a hundred

times," he said. "He was the loveliest swordsman and the gayest fighter who ever put the fear of God into his country's enemies—*Have at it again, Sir Pandy!—Try another!—A lusty stroke by the Lord.* Ah, I can see him now! He was an inspiration—charming, chaffing, ruthless." His eyes glowed and softened. "And I saw him die," he ended quietly. "Nobody but a man with a clean conscience dies like that."

Ruddy Gore sitting hunched like a toad over his cigar twinkled malignantly.

"Did ye ever see his accounts?" he asked after a pause.

Old For-ever resumed his seat.

"You're past hope," he said.

"Then shall we revenons à nos bunniahhs?" suggested the Chief.

"Amen," said the soldier. . . . "Who've you got at the Post at Aimal Chabutra?"

"A detachment of Ludhiana Sikhs."

"Any British officers?"

"I can't say. If there aren't there oughter be. I've warned the General. But you know what you soldiers are. If a civilian asks you to do a thing that's a very good reason why you shouldn't."

Old For-ever munched his pipe.

"I'll ride along this evening and find out what's going on," he said.

He played his card with cool effrontery, and won his trick.

"I wish you would," grumbled the Chief with obvious relief. "Pass the night in the Fort and

have chota hazri with me to-morrow on your way home and report. I'll send along a sowar to warn em you're comin. So they don't blot you in excess of zeal."

He settled in his chair. It was a matter of common knowledge on the Frontier that Old For-ever was the only man, soldier or civilian, from whom the stubborn old man ever sought or took advice.

"Now what *d'you* make of the bobbery, young Lad?"

"I've never had a doubt," the soldier replied. "It's a little private speculation of Ibrahim Khan's. He's sore about Kadir. If we hadn't subsidised Kadir, Ibrahim Khan wouldn't have minded. But we did. And he says he's been slighted. . . ." He took his pipe out of his mouth and wagged it—"Old Ibrahim means to hold that bunniah until you've paid him a subsidy for keeping the Pass open during the War. That's my reading of the situation."

The Chief shook his head.

"Ingenious, Lad," he said. "But it don't meet the facts." He paused and continued with apparent inconsequence—"How's the mem?"

"Fit as a fiddle. She's always in training for her Derby."

The other threw a swift, an almost furtive, glance at him.

"She won't get nerves if I put a policeman on her verandah to-night?"

Old For-ever looked up.

"Why?"

Ruddy Gore inhaled slowly.

"I'm policing every outlying bungalow that's got a white woman in it. And I've got a flying patrol buzzing about on the road in cantonments at night."

"What's up?"

It was a moment before the other answered. Then he said—

"Kadir on the ramp."

This time Old For-ever did not mock. He knew his man too well.

"But I thought he was back in the Kurram!"

The Chief shook a solemn head.

"He's in the Kohat Pass."

The soldier was curious.

"What's he doing there?—Preaching a Jehad?"

"No. He's come after his wife."

Old For-ever looked up keenly.

"The woman who bolted with him from Ibrahim Khan's village?"

The other nodded.

"Has she left him?"

"Yes: after he'd cut off one of her breasts. He tired of her and said she'd been unfaithful and—the usual. He went after her to finish the job. But he couldn't get track of her. Then somebody told him she'd gone to the Harlots' Quarter in Peshawar City, and was lying up there. The wife of Kadir the Raider—anybody's wench!—Twig?—That annoyed the great man, and that was why he raided—to get her back and revenge himself on us for harbouring her."

But the rumour though true was premature. She didn't come in to the City till twenty-four hours after he'd left it."

"To the Harlots' Quarter?"

"Yes."

The soldier grunted.

"In all my experience I never knew a Pathan woman of the khan class do that," he said.

"Nor have I," answered the Chief. "But then not every Pathan woman has had the privilege of being the wife of Kadir the Cruel. You see she couldn't go back to her own people because of the blood-feud; and she daren't come to me because her husband had told her we should take her baby from her and send her down country to work as a slave in the gold mines. All she wanted was to hide-away from Kadir." His eyes blinked: his face crumpled up like that of a child about to cry. You understood then how rough old Ruddy Gore had earned for himself among the tribesmen the title of the Father of the Frontier. "Poor child! Of course the procuresses of the City had no use for her in that condition. So she came to me at last, had to—with her baba. You never saw such a sight—she had grass in her mouth, and her face was smeared with soot—*I am naked before you*, she wailed, and touched my feet. Huzur could do anything he liked with her, anything! Put her in kaid, anything, so long as he didn't send her back to her husband, or part her from her baba."

Old For-ever was profoundly moved.

"What did you do?"

"I sent her along to the Khan of Talkal-bala . . . to look after. She'll be all right with him. He's a good fellow, and he's mad-jealous of Kadir the Great because of his izzat. They all are."

The two sat in silence. The horror of physical cruelty, perhaps more marked in the men of their race than in any other, had laid hold upon them. The Chief's face was still puckered, and his eyelids blinking rapidly as he took up his tale.

"Last night I got a note from Kadir demanding—*demanding* his wife back; and saying he wanted to finish the job." He laid his chubby hand on his chest. "You know." He turned his round blue eyes to his friend, and there were tears in them. "Fifty years ago, before we came here, she *would* have been handed back, and Kadir *would* have finished the job—at his leisure." He flung out his fist. "And then these Exeter-Hall-Psalm-singing swine want us to hand back India to the benevolent rule of our dear brown brother in the Lord."

Old For-ever put in a question.

"Where did Kadir write from?"

"Ibrahim Khan's house."

The soldier raised his eyebrows. Then he shook his head sceptically.

"I should like to see that note."

"I'll show it you to-morrow, the whole screed. I've only told you in part. He says we've got his wife, and he's going to bag a memsahib,

dead or alive, and alive for preference—as reprisals. He says moreover that a memsahib killed his father and when he's got one, he'll teach her. That's why I'm taking no risks."

Old For-ever was more amused than moved.

"Bag a memsahib!" he laughed. "It's never yet been done; and never will be done."

"All the more reason why Kadir the Great, the successor of Timur and Baba and all the rest of em, should attempt it," the Chief replied. "Besides, Lad, it has been done—and in the Kohat Pass, too."

The soldier looked up.

"When, Old Un?"

"George Lawrence's wife in '48 when the second Sikh War broke out. George was in Peshawar at the time. When he heard of Shere Singh's treachery he packed off his wife and two children to the Residency at Lahore. Sultan Mahomed Khan, the Afghan Sirdar, swore by the Koran to escort em and see them through. But he turned traitor and held them up in his own castle in Kohat and then transferred em to the camp of that wily old devil Chatar Singh. . . . It was one of my first thrills on the Frontier."

Old For-ever was impressed.

"If I ever knew I'd forgotten," he said. "Anyway it was long before my time."

The Chief rose to go and paused looking at a photograph of Marion and her child.

Like many bachelors in the East, childless themselves and ageing, he shewed an almost

morbid interest in the children of his contemporaries and friends.

"What are you going to do with the boy, Lad?"

The other who carried his love of method into every detail of his life, great and small, had the child's career cut-and-dried for years ahead.

"I shall send him home at four," he answered pat. "Preparatory School eight to thirteen. Winchester thirteen to seventeen and a half. Then Sandhurst. I don't want him to come out here before he's—"

The Chief made a gesture of dissent.

"Never out here!" he cried almost violently. "Don't let him sweat his soul out in this dam country. India's never been a country for white women; and its ceasing to be for white men. By 1900 if things go on as they're going now, there won't be a sahib from Landi Khana to Cape Comorin. India'll have relapsed into jungle with Kadir and his kind doling out justice and mercy. And they'll deserve all they'll get."

"Some of em," interjected the soldier.

The two men strolled down the garden.

"Where are you going to get the men from to man the services under modern conditions?—Can't be done. No scope. No initiative. What room to-day would there be for a Nicholson on the Frontier! Why they'd break him in ten minutes. They want babus not Nicholsons. It's all centralization, centralization. No room for initiative, or authority.

Don't trust the man on the spot is our modern policy. Somebody sitting on your head all the blessed time. Why I have to write to Calcutta for permission to wipe a drop of sweat off my nose during the monsoon."

They had reached the road.

"I quite agree," said Old For-ever. "I've never been on an expedition yet but the show's been spoilt by some Political wet blanketing the soldiers all the time. And as to Nicholson!" He turned to meet the Chief's eye. "Why, I was with him when he rode through the Kohat Pass on the eve of the Mutiny with a chit in his pocket from John Lawrence forbidding him to do so, and another from Sidney Cotton ordering him to prepare to meet his God if he got through to Peshawar alive as it was his, Sidney's, intention to have him shot for insubordination."

The Chief paused in front of his carriage and fixed his famous bull-like glare on his old friend.

"None of it, young Lad!" he muttered and climbed heavily into the carriage.

CHAPTER XXIII

BOBS BABA

OLD FOR-EVER walked back swiftly to the bungalow.

As he entered the house seemed to sleep.

He peeped into the little bedroom which harboured Maharaj Singh. The Subadar-Major snoozed, his turban off, his quoit shewing, and long black hair, thinning now, partially loosed. His strong sallow face, beautiful in sleep, was lined. Seen thus he looked older than his years, but an athlete every inch of him.

Then he looked into the nursery. The ayah too slept, crouched about her knees. Indeed the only creature in the house who seemed awake was little Bobs. His sunbonnet dangled from his fat creased neck the whiteness of which was enhanced by a necklace of corals. The child saw his dad and shook a rattle at him. His hair, thick and fair with tawny streaks, was swept in a long curl off his rounded brow. He opened wide hazel eyes, dark-lashed, with a look of amused surprise on this new and pleasant world. There was determination in the mouth, firm almost to ferocity, and in the long delicate chin that curled upwards like a leaf. Marion

always saw her husband perfectly mirrored in the child, Old For-ever his wife.

The boy gurgled at his dad, who hid his face behind wide-spread fingers.

A sardonic expression, exactly that of his father, crept across the baby's face.

"Guckoo!" he gurgled in the sweetest little voice and banged his rattle.

Old For-ever kissed his hand and returned to his wife's room. Marion still slept, her camisole open, and the swell of her breast, charming as the curve of a young moon, just revealed. He bent and kissed it, cool to his lips as an apple and as firm.

Then he stood a moment looking down on her. The wear and tear of the War, following on years of life beyond the Indus, had told even on her. Marion was only just over thirty, but the strong pale face was scamed already. Yet for him she was still young; still in perfect bloom; the colour and fragrance of her life undimmed. For his eyes it was no miracle, but the most natural thing in life, that the lean woman on the bed beneath him should be the mother of the plump rose-bud babe cooing next door.

He should say nothing to her about Kadir. Marion was game as a pebble; and her nerves were iron, as that calm sleep of hers on the eve of the adventure shewed. But he would spare her the additional strain of a rumour in which he did not believe. . . .

Kadir was *not* in the Pass. How could he be? Ibrahim Khan in his present mood would not

permit the presence in his territory of a rival against whom he had a very real grudge.

A thought struck him as he lay down. The raider in pursuance of his ambition, swollen with the pride of his recent success, and craving for revenge, *might* have forced his way into the Pass at the head of a lashkar : for Tirah was swarming with lusty young warriors who had not been blooded during the War and were spoiling for a fight. If so Ibrahim Khan would quite certainly have resisted him. A fight between the two *might* account for the bobbery in the Pass. He pondered the thought with contracted brows and rejected it. If there was inter-tribal trouble of a serious nature the Chief must have heard of it. No. He would believe Kadir was in the Pass when he saw him—and not a moment before.

Contentedly he fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE KABULI HORSE-DEALER

THE bugles were sounding Retreat from the high brown walls of the Sikh fort that dominates the native city of Peshawar when he was roused by his bearer. He found Marion in the dining-room, already dressed, a muffler about her throat, and stouter than of wont by reason of woollen jerseys.

"You look like business," he remarked with approval.

"I thought best wrap up warm," she answered.

He nodded.

"It'll be keen," he said.

Old For-ever was one of the few men who genuinely enjoy danger ; and he found now to his secret shame that the fact that his wife and child were about to share the peril with him only added to the relish as making a fresh call upon his strength. He told her of the Chief's visit ; and the innocent ruse by which he had secured a passport to the Post at the mouth of the Pass.

Marion glowed with satisfaction.

"My dear, how heaven-sent !" she cried.

"It *was* luck," he admitted. "It means we're all right to Aimal Chabutra."

"If they don't see me!"

He dismissed the idea with a jerk of his head.

"Bah! they won't see you."

She poured out the coffee.

"What about the trouble in the Pass?—Did he say anything?"

Old For-ever sipped.

"There *is* trouble. He's vague about it. How grave it is he doesn't know." He glanced up shyly. "You're sure you want to come?"

She flashed her sword.

"Yes," she said; and her voice was fierce with challenge.

He saw that she would fight.

"My dear," he said gently. "I want you to come. Don't mistake me."

She lowered her blade.

"Thank-you," she said, deep and very quiet, and looked at him with soft eyes over her cup as she drank.

Then the bearer, a red night-cap on his head, an unlighted lantern in his hand, entered and announced that the Subadar-Major sent his salaams and all was ready.

Old For-ever put on his yellow posheet, patched and incredibly worn, shoved his revolver into his pocket and went out.

On the steps stood Maharaj Singh ordering all things with quiet authority. He too wore a posheet, gold-embroidered with a black fur collar from Bokhara, as gorgeous and as shabby

as that of his Colonel, but unlike his Colonel's decorated with an undulating line of faded medal-ribands.

A two-pony tonga with a tilt stood at the door. The driver wore a black pagri with a gold tassel, and a bugle was suspended from his neck. In the shafts was a sturdy white country-bred stained pink, with a split ear, in breast-harness, wearing a turquoise necklace for charm ; while lashed outside the shafts was an old chestnut waler, obviously a caster. A steel yoke bound the ill-matched pair. The ayah was busy packing under the seat Bobs' baba's treasures and necessities: his doll, his folding cot, his little rubber bath.

Marion escorted by Maharaj Singh and her husband took her place on the back-seat of the tonga ; and the bearer climbed on to the top of the tilt with his lantern. Lal Singh handed him up a rifle ; and he bound a cartridge-belt about his waist. Then Old For-ever ran back into the house. He fumbled in a drawer amid collars and ties, found his penny-whistle, and thrust it into his pocket beside his service revolver. Then he rejoined the party outside.

Marion peeped out at him.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. Only I'd forgotten something."

A black pony stallion, in a high-peaked native saddle with a steel pommel and a red sash for martingale, was being led gingerly up and down by a dingy and dejected syce who looked like a

serf and probably was one ; while a burly Afghan horse-dealer, ringleted and rosy, in a round Astrakhan cap, stood in the back-ground, beside him a huge dog, crop-eared, bob-tailed, sand-coloured.

Maharaj Singh pointed at the pony.

" He is for thee, sahib," he whispered. " I have hired him."

" Even as thou hiredst the camel, O King of a robber race ? " inquired his Colonel genial and grim.

The old Sikh was deprecatory.

" Nay, sahib. I told him the Sirkar had need of him, and that was a great honour for him. *Let us leave the talking to the women*, I said. *This is a very urgent matter. Those who help the sahibs will be helped by them.*"

" What hast thou paid him, Subadar-Major Sahib ? "

" I have paid fifty rupees into his hand, sahib ; and have promised him another fifty in Kohat, whither he was taking the pony if he failed to sell him in Peshawar."

" And if he never sees his pony again ? "

Maharaj Singh laid his hand upon his breast.

" Then that is the will of God ! " he said.

Old For-ever took out a visiting card and wrote on the back of it: *If things go wrong please give this chap rs.200 out of my effects —price of black Turcoman pony stallion.* He walked across with the card to the Afghan. But the dealer, of the sturdy, yeoman type, brushed

it brusquely aside and muttered, with a gesture of independence, that between gentlemen no such things were necessary. He knew the sahib and trusted him.

"Thou art no Sikh, sahib," he muttered, rolling his eyes in the direction of the Subadar-Major. "Truly they are a treacherous race of bullies, and too handy altogether with their kirpans when one is unarmed. Well for Hind that now they must take the second place and kow-tow to the Sahib-log. But *thou*, sahib, directly my eye fell on thee as thou camest out of the house my heart was like a bird in my breast. For thy parents are my parents, and thy children mine. Thou art my master and my king."

He knew the sahib well as he knew his own brother. Except when there was a foolish war between their two countries had not he Mahomed Akbar, been in and out of the Derajat trading ponies to the officer-log any time these twenty years? Did not he remember the sahib at Bannu in '68, and at Dera Ismail Khan in '70, and at Tank before the War? The pony was the jewel of his eye, dearer to him far than his own son. And for speed and endurance there was not the like of him in Asia. Also the pony was beloved of God and would bring his rider luck and great glory. Two days since as they drifted down through the gorge of the Kabul river, when the raft came opposite the fakir's grave on the island nigh Ali Baba, and the rowers stopped rowing and salaamed to the holy

shrine, lo ! the pony knew and neighed. That surely was a good omen.

He crossed to the pony, and lifted its eyelid with his thumb.

"Behold ! It is the eye of a woman, soft and full of fire. Never did I see the like save once after the Pushkar Fair in the head of a courtesan at the house in Ajmere—one Lily-of-the-Lake who sang Persian songs and told bawdy stories and mimicked the memsahibs and robbed me of a hundred rupees and a ruby ring."

He strolled back to the sahib, beckoning to the syce to lead the pony up.

The man tried to obey ; but the black stallion snorted with inflated nostrils and backed away, digging in his toes and shewing every symptom of fear.

The horse-dealer gurgled something in his throat.

Marion leaned out of the tonga.

"What is it he says ?" she asked Maharaj Singh.

"He says the pony has never seen a white man before. Hence all this shaitani (devilry). The dealer says he is sharif (a gentleman) and will behave as such once the Colonel Sahib is established on the throne. He brought him down from Jellalabad only two days since by way of the gorge lest he be stolen in the Khyber by Kadir the Cruel."

Marion pricked up her ears.

"Is Kadir in the Khyber ?"

"That is the story of this dealer, Presence," the Subadar-Major answered. "I know nothing."

Marion called across to her husband. "Do you hear, Tom?—Kadir's in the Khyber?"

The other's back was to her, his eye measuring the pony.

"Ubiquitous gentleman!" he muttered.

"I'm glad though," said Marion, leaning back.

Old For-ever did not hear. He had snatched his opportunity, made his spring, and was home in the saddle.

"Wo, my little lambkin!—Steady, my bottle o the bubbly!" he murmured soothingly, as he found his stirrups and felt the reins.

"Well done!" called Marion.

The stallion crouched as though about to lie down, pawing with one fore-foot and blowing stertorously.

The quiet voice above him, the clip of accustomed thighs, the touch upon the reins, masterful as it was gentle, seemed to reassure him. He straightened his knees, and stood erect, snorting and sweating. Then he dropped his chin and began to play with his bit.

Marion leaned out.

"He's all right, Tom," she called soothingly.

"Yes," her husband answered. "It's the smell of the white man he don't like or understand. It's something new to him. When I jumped on his back he thought I was the tiger he'd heard so much about in his native uplands."

Then Lal Singh and the ayah appeared upon the steps. The young Sikh had a bundle in his arms. Delicately he came down the steps and handed it to the memsahib, whose face as she took it became divinely satisfied.

The ayah stood on the steps above, a Cassandra-like figure, her sari covering her lower face and wailed.

"I shall never see my baba more. I do not want them to take him from me."

Maharaj Singh rebuked her stately.

"To-morrow shalt thou join thy baba, O foolish one. But thou shalt go by day along the trunk road instead of through the dark Pass at midnight where danger lurks and the bud-mashes lie in wait for young women such as thee, sweet to the taste as a pomegranate."

The ayah, a Marathi from the Western Ghauts, and by no means devoid of the old fighting spirit of her race, refused to be comforted.

"They will slit the throat of my baba and cut off his nose that is like a rose-bud and spoil him even as they did Pippin Sahib. I know these Pathan swine."

The Subadar-Major ran up the steps, seized her furiously by the wrist and thrust his bearded face into hers.

"Peace, mad one!" he whispered. "That surely is the way to bring evil on thy baba. Hast thou no eyes in thy monkey-face? The tonga-wallah is a Pathan. Verily if even one of the Sahib-log miscalls a Pathan thus, he risks a knife in the back for his pains. What then

if thou, a Hindu from the South, abuse him so?"

"I care nothing," wailed the woman. "It is my baba whom I need. Would I were going through the dark Pass with him and my mem-sahib!"

Maharaj Singh flung the wrist that he was holding impatiently away.

"Away with thee, foolish one! It is girls such as thee, young and comely and with voices like the turtle-dove, the Pathans seek and would lead away to captivity in their towers amid the dark and stony hills. And there wouldest thou pass thy life, and when thou wailest and makest shaitani as now the old women would deal with thee as they know how and as I dare not for shame because of the presence of the mem-sahib. And never again wouldest thou see the sun or dear Mother Ganges or the pleasant hills of thine own South. Then indeed wouldest thou have something to make a great wailing over."

Scornfully he strode down the steps.

"As to thy baba have no fear for him," he called over his shoulders. "He has a powerful escort. Is there not the Colonel Sahib? And am I not Maharaj Singh, Subadar-Major Pank's Punjabis? And is not that Lal Singh, of my race, and a warrior even as I am myself, who has his rifle and takes his place beside the driver and is so strong that he can break the back of a crocodile in his young hands? Cease, foolish one! Thy baba will be guarded as was Aurang-zeb."

He went down the drive and out into the road.

There the camel-wallah was tightening the rope-girths of the saddle. His beast, muzzled now, was resentful as always and with weaving head. An urchin stood upon his knees to prevent him rising till the riders were seated.

Maharaj Singh took his seat on the rearward saddle behind the surly-faced driver. Then the boy got off the knees of the camel ; and in a flash the great beast was on his feet and stood snarling and swaying.

The sirwan twitched the rope attached to the nose-peg that served as a bit ; and the camel gathering way lolloped off at a long ungainly trot into the dusk. The tonga followed, the bearer squatting on the roof, and Lal Singh, rifle in hand, beside the driver. Old For-ever came last on the fretting black stallion, riding gingerly. The little cavalcade struck South at a rapid rate making towards the distant spur of hills that rose like islands out of the sea of plain: a barrier-reef jagged and misty against the sky, through which ran the Pass that was their goal.

The sun had set an hour, and it was already cold.

PART IV

KADIR THE RAIDER

CHAPTER XXV

ON THE ROAD

THE dusk covered them like a light veil as the little cavalcade sped swiftly through the cantonments.

They skirted the native city and took the road that ran straight across the flat brown plain under shisham trees towards the hills that made a blue wall across their path.

The Subadar-Major on his tall camel padded away at a long lopé in front, the yellow of his poshteen dimming always in the dusk. Marion sat with strong pale face, glancing now at the babe sleeping in her lap, now at the hushed landscape.

The colour was fading fast out of the plain, and seemed to gather in the sky ; the road was restless before it settled down for the night. A traction-engine, hideous, powerful, trampling, lay in an obscure mass at the roadside, a hooded chowkidar with a lantern watching over the symbol of his alien masters' dominion.

A body of Afghans, grey-bearded old Abrahams, young bloods with long ringleted lovelocks hanging down before their ears, shoes in hand, and feet dusty, plodded past towards the native city.

"They come down through the passes in the autumn to work for the Sirkar on the road, and avoid forced labour for the Amir," Old For-ever told his wife, the black Turcoman steadyng at every stride. "They go back with the crows to Kabul."

The stars began to peep ; and behind the rampart of the surrounding hills was the glow of a rising moon. The day's work was over, and men were using the last glimmer of light for prayer or pastime before darkness fell.

Here a group gathered in the dusk round a little carpet to watch a wrestling match, there a lonely figure, prostrate in the dust at the roadside as he had been since sundown, rose quietly, took up his praying mat, and trudged upon his way.

Once Old For-ever shoved his pony up alongside the tonga as though to make of himself a bulwark between the woman within and some potential danger. His face became steady, and his right hand sought his pocket. A huge man in a check skull-cap, a patch-work quilt thrown about his shoulders, passed.

"Who is it?" Marion asked.

"A hill-man—from the Swat valley, I should say."

"What's that steel thing he's carrying?"

Her husband laughed.

"I thought it was a ghazi sword. It's some sort of praying apparatus I see now."

A laden donkey, a belated yoke of oxen homing from the fields, a string of caravan

camels, their string bags bulging and foals at foot, made for the nearest serai. A woman in a black chadar bore homewards on her head a huge pumpkin.

With the darkness a great peace was falling on all. The soft plop and shuffle of the camel rustling along in front, the rhythmical clatter of the ponies' feet, the jingle of the steel tonga-yoke, supplied music, muffled and mysterious. The night rang with crickets.

Marion glanced over her shoulder and saw the high back of Maharaj Singh bobbing up and down against a gathering background of stars. She could no longer distinguish the pattern on his poshteen, but she caught the occasional flash of something in his right hand, and knew it for his knife bared and ready for use. Once or twice she saw his left hand pat his coat and knew that he was feeling for his god. Then her eyes sought her husband, trotting beside her, wary and watchful, and the gleam of the butt-end of his pistol protruding from his pocket told her that he too was prepared.

"I'm well-escorted," she said to him with a little smile.

He gave her a reassuring nod.

"You could go through alone on a night like this," he answered.

She looked down at the face of her babe, pale and uplifted to hers.

At her heart there was the utter satisfaction that drives out fear.

"I'm not the least afraid, Tom," she said,

flashing up at him a glance of rare tenderness.

Then Lal Singh, who was sitting in front beside the tonga-wallah, his rifle, bayonet fixed, grounded between his ammunition boots, turned and shouted something to her husband excitedly.

She looked round.

The Subadar-Major had slewed in his saddle.

He called back in warning voice and increased his pace.

The clatter of horses feet coming at speed could be heard.

“Cavalry patrol,” said Tom.

He swung over to the right, and closed up with steady eyes.

The tonga gave a lurch. The driver was pulling up. Old For-ever surged up alongside him.

“Drive on!” he ordered low. “Drive swiftly! Lal Singh!”

The young Sikh dropped the butt of his rifle on the driver’s feet and rootled him with a sharp elbow.

“Chalo, soor!” he muttered.

The tonga leapt forward; and the horseman dropped back.

“It’s all right,” he said quietly to Marion. “There’s only a duffadar in charge, and he’s in a hurry to get back to his lines and his curree-bhat.”

The patrol, lance at toe, dashed past at the trot. Only the duffadar’s sudden—*Eyes Rith!*

as they spanked by warned Old For-ever that he had been recognized.

The danger passed, he nodded at his wife.

"We ought to be all right now till we get to the Post," he said.

She leaned out.

"Must we stop there?"

Her husband laughed.

"No alternative, I'm afraid," he said. "You see, I'm on Government business—that's my *raison d'être* and our passport. Besides, the Post's bang on the road. We couldn't rush it. We should be certain to be challenged."

"Pity," said Marion.

"I'm not so sure," her husband answered. "We shall have to change camels anyway. That brute's dead to the world. I can see by the way he's wallowing in his stride. It's the pace has killed him."

There was silence again, only broken by the feet of the trotting ponies, from whose bodies a steam rose. The night was keen. A mist swathed the feet of the approaching hills. Marion tucked another lap of rug about the sleeping child. The tonga jolted; the man on the tilt seemed to bounce; the road was abominable and growing worse.

"I believe old Ruddy Gore keeps the road in this condition deliberately to stop traffic and save himself trouble," muttered Old For-ever irritably.

"How long to the Pass this pace?" Marion asked.

"A month of Sundays I should think," her husband replied. "I never knew a Pathan drive at anything but a gallop before."

He rode up alongside Lal Singh and spoke to him.

"The tonga-wallah says he is *not* a Pathan, sahib," the young Sikh explained. "He is a Punjabi Mahomedan from Campbellpur."

"He *was* a Pathan when the Subadar-Major Sahib engaged him," retorted his Colonel abruptly. "How comes it that he has ceased to be now?"

"He says it is well to be a Pathan when you are in the country of the Pathans," answered the youth naïvely. "That means better business and makes things easier."

"And that is why he wears the black pagri and tells lies to the Subadar-Major Sahib?" said Old For-ever.

"He says his ponies are tired, sahib," the orderly replied, "because they do not like the way we are going: for there is trouble in the Pass. The old Mullah of Ghazni has come down from Koh-Daman with dust on his head and is preaching a *Jehad* throughout Tirah."

"Tell him he lies," answered his Colonel. "The old Mullah was slain at Charasia during the War. Was I not present at his killing? Alone, and sword in hand, he charged the brigade. He was a great saint and a brave swordsman; and now he sleeps in peace."

The tonga-wallah muttered to the orderly, who began again.

"He says Kadir the Raider is in the Pass, sahib ; come with a lakh of men to take his wife away. With his own eyes did he see her in Peshawar."

Old For-ever called across to the driver.

"Didst thou of a truth see this woman, tonga-wallah?"

The man babbled, eager to display himself and his wares.

"Most certainly I saw her, sahib. She was in a room on the wall of the city nigh unto the Fort, with her baba. But she could earn nothing by reason of her mutilation : for no man desired her. So she exposed herself for money to buy bread for her child. And men paid to see what Kadir the Cruel, who devours women, had done to his wife : for that was a great wonder. I myself, Mir Butcha, the tonga-wallah, paid six annas, which was a big price for so small a favour, and one which I could ill afford. And it was only because she was the wife of Kadir the Raider that I paid it. But the Afghans and Hazaras and Shinwaris from across the Frontier would not pay : for they said they had seen the same thing often before, and there was nothing strange about it, except that she had still one breast. And when all who would pay were finished, and there was no more money to be earned, the woman went out and threw herself at the feet of the Sirdar Sahib."

"It was a very shameful thing for her to make money out of her affliction," reflected the wise and pious Lal Singh.

"She did it for her baba's sake, O foolish one!" replied the tonga-wallah. "Also to spite her husband and lower his izzat in the bazaar: for Kadir the Raider has the pride of an emperor, and his heart would be vexed when he heard that his wife was exposing herself for money on the city wall, and his son also."

The orderly chimed in again, shrilly this time.

"Whom his father had made no-man, sahib, because he said his wife was a viper, and no seed must be raised to her. His own son, sahib! Ah, these swine of Pathans!"

The tonga-wallah took up the tale afresh. "And one man from Tanab said he would give the mother a rupee if she would show him her son. But she, being a woman, fell upon him, screaming and . . ."

"Enough," said Old For-ever, and dropped back to the tail of the tonga.

"What are they telling you?" Marion asked him.

"The ordinary dirt and drivel, my dear," replied her husband casually.

CHAPTER XXVI

REPRISALS

THEY drove through a sleeping village.

"It's like a fortress," Marion remarked, regarding the brown battlemented walls.

"It needs to be," her husband replied. "We're in the country of raiders."

They jogged through without challenge save from an old sow who, roused from a dung-heap, pursued them furiously and with squeals down the road.

In the next village there was unrest and revelry abroad. On the roof of a house a woman stood, black against the night, and howled to the moon. A horror held the place. There were lights moving, voices raised, harsh and shrill, in threat and entreaty.

"Matanni," said Old For-ever. "We're only five miles from the Pass."

The Subadar-Major had fallen into a walk. He stalked down the street like the shadow of death. The tonga followed. In a hujra (rest-house) down an alley Marion saw a party of men sitting on charpoys in deshabille, singing and smoking. They wore tunics and were armed with rifles. She recognized them at a glance for native policemen.

One of them was walking down the middle of the street shouting in Pushtu at the top of his voice, and dragging by the wrist a woman, who kept up a continuous screaming, shot with sobs and gasps. The man was a hulking lout, his tunic open, and trousers disarranged. Marion marked his face and the leer on it. He was a Pathan, drunk with bhang ; and as he rolled along he plucked continually at the woman as though he were leading a reluctant heifer to the slaughter. A group of his comrades, in the same condition as himself, followed behind, bunting the woman forward with their hands, and roaring laughter. The woman was pulling back, her little brown feet, silver-bangled, holding the road stubbornly but in vain. Then she disappeared down an alley, screaming still. A door banged.

Marion, used to the Frontier though she was, shut her eyes and sickened. She had been present at that scene so often in her myriad lives, all the way down history, as every woman has ; sometimes as spectator, sometimes as victim. The look on the captor's face as he led his prey away down that dark alley amid the jeers of his boon-companions was nauseatingly familiar to her.

She opened her eyes. "What is it?" she asked, shuddering. "What's she done?"

Old For-ever was looking round as he rode. There were no men to be seen ; only women, and old women at that he should say, huddling in the doors of their hovels.

One of these, her chadar cast about her face, crept out to him, and laid a trembling hand upon the bridle of the pony.

The act was arresting alike in its importunity and its pitifulness. He guessed aright that only urgent need would have driven the petitioner to such audacity.

He drew rein at once, while the tonga walked on.

"What is it, mai (mother)?" he asked kindly.

The hag cast a shuddering glance over her shoulder.

"Save us, sahib!" she whispered. "Else there is no help for us. These evil ones are the men of Kadir the Cruel disguised as servants of the Sirkar. Sons of pigs!—no woman is safe with them. *The old for mockery, the young for sport, the middle-aged for meat.* Such is their saying."

She was quaking with fear; and the silver bangles on her scraggy old wrists jangled as she hung on to the pony's bridle.

"Why dost thou think these be the men of Kadir, mother?" asked the Englishman.

The woman dropped her chadar so that he could see her wrinkled brow and old tormented eyes.

"Kadir was in the village himself at dawn, sahib," she croaked. "With these eyes I beheld him. He went back to wait in the Pass; but he left these budmashes behind. Truly they are the spawn of Jehannum without reverence or shame."

Then a middle-aged man with a long black beard came up. He was a lumbadar with whom, in the past, Old For-ever had sometimes hawked. He liked the man, sly though he might be, and knew that he bore even among the critical civilians the reputation of being the best of a bad lot of local head-men.

"Is there peace in thy village, Nur Din?" asked Old For-ever.

"Yea, sahib. There is peace. Only the police are here."

"If there is peace how come the police in the village?" asked the Englishman to test him.

"Because of the trouble in the Pass, sahib," the lumbadar replied.

It was a lie, as his interrogator knew, but it was a reasonable one.

The man would cover his village as best he could; and that was natural.

"Kadir the Raider *was* on the outskirts of the village at noon, even as the mother says," the lumbadar continued. "But when he heard the police were here he went back into the Pass."

"Where are the young men?" asked Old For-ever. "It is not like Pathans to leave their women to the mercy of strangers."

"Two have been killed, sahib. Some are in kaid. Others have gone with Kadir: for they say—*Better the cruelty of Kadir than the tyranny of the servants of the Sirkar.*" He shot an oblique glance at the sahib to see if his dart had gone home.

The Englishman reined in the Turcoman stallion who was fretting to be after the tonga.

"Is Kadir in the Pass then?" he asked.

"That is certain, sahib."

"Then has he made his peace with Ibrahim Khan?"

"Yea, sahib. They have come together and sworn great friendship on the Koran. Kadir has paid in full the bride-price of the woman he took, although he has lost her; and moreover, he has given to Ibrahim Khan half the loot from the bunniah's caravan as dustoorie (accommodation money)."

"It was Kadir then who raided the caravan?"

"Of a surety, sahib."

"Where is the bunniah?"

"They cut his throat on the hillside at dawn because the ransom was not paid. And now they have thrown sangars across the throat of the Pass and abide behind them singing praises to Allah and his Prophet, and awaiting with fervour the punishment that will surely fall upon them."

Old For-ever nodded gravely.

"It will come," he said. "Long is the arm of the Sirkar. Slow its justice, but sure as the vengeance of God."

He trotted on after the tonga.

Marion leaned out towards him.

"Well?" she asked, and his accustomed ear marked a note of anxiety in her voice.

"There's a punitive party of police settled in the village," her husband answered her.

"They've been giving trouble. The Chief told me something about it: so did Joey Elphinstone."

"What have they been doing?" asked Marion.

"Oh, the ordinary: dacoity, murder, abducting women, and the usual business. Just before Christmas a man cut off his wife's nose, and bolted across the Frontier to join Kadir. The Reconciliation Jirga which sits once a year on outlaw cases wanted to reinstate him. But the Deputy Commissioner said that if he came back he must stand his trial. Well, he did come back but only to abduct another woman. And the lumbadars, some of whom are in with Kadir, instead of giving him in charge, aided and abetted him."

"What had that woman done?" Marion asked.

Her husband didn't answer.

"Tom, what's going to happen to her?" Marion continued. "Torture—or worse?"

"My dear," he replied gently, "this is the Frontier. And on the Frontier you must do as the Frontier does—to some extent. This is what they call reprisals. But the havildar who ought to be in charge is sick or asleep; and the men are running amuck. I can't stop and see to it—for I must get back to the regiment. But I shall report at once to the Chief. He'll be as sick as herrings."

Marion gathered her babe in her arms.

"I'm glad he's a boy," she said. "God help all women on this Frontier!"

A terror seized and shook her. She glanced again towards the rugged promontory of hills, so near now, and that dark blob she knew to be the Pass opening like a maw to swallow her. Supposing . . . just supposing ! Then her stubborn mind asserted itself and slammed the door upon her fears. The muffled music of the cavalcade, trotting again now, came to her help. She slept uneasily.

Somebody was trying to take Bobs from her. She fought and woke, clutching her baby so fiercely that he whimpered in his sleep. It was the tonga dropping abruptly into a walk that had roused her. She looked over her shoulder. They were right under the hills.

Maharaj Singh on his camel was walking ahead at a slow and stately pace.

Tom was smiling at her.

"Had a bit of a snooze? "

She evaded the question.

"We're there then? "

"Yes. That's the mouth of the Pass. This is the Fort."

It was a little square block-house, that looked as if it was made of mud, silvery-brown in the moonlight. All along the top of the keep were the familiar boulders about the size of a man's head that adorn the battlements of every fort along the Frontier to confuse the aim of any surreptitious sniper lurking in the night for a shot at the sentry. Behind the boulders now something flashed and moved. It was a bayonet.

As Marion looked the bayonet came to a halt. The sentinel on the keep challenged.

The Subadar-Major rode forward with uplifted hand.

"Ho, brother!" he called. "Shoot not but open!—This is the Colonel of Pank's Punjabis on urgent business."

"Is there a British Officer in the fort, Subadar-Major Sahib?" Old For-ever called.

"Two, sahib," Maharaj Singh replied over his shoulder quietly.

"All right, Subadar-Major Sahib. Then I'll come."

CHAPTER XXVII

AT THE POST

HE dismounted and handed his pony to Lal Singh. Then he went up to the Fort and hammered at the postern door with the butt-end of his pistol.

"Who is it?" called a voice.

"Colonel Oliver from Peshawar."

There was whispering on the other side the door between two young gentlemen who bore, it seemed, the names of Tubby and Chubby.

"Who is it, Chub?"

"Old For-ever."

"It's a trap you fool! Tell him to stand back from the door and blot him if he monkies."

"Rot, you fool! I saw him through the loophole. He's come from Peshawar. We've got to evacuate before we're overwhelmed. I told you so all along. Coming, sir! Chalo, chalo! Get out, Peter, you old hog, you!"

There was a clanging of bolts; and the iron doors swung back cautiously. First there poked out the bottle-nose of an old pointer, ridiculously friendly. Behind the pointer stood two English lads, one in a cloak, the other in pyjamas and dressing-gown. Tubby was short and thick and looked his name: he had a cartridge-belt girt

about his dressing-gown, and in one hand he brandished a revolver. Chubby on the contrary had been christened clearly in irony or in infancy. A lank cadaverous youth, he held a candle and peered through eye-glasses, diffidently. Behind the two fair boys showed the dark and gleaming faces of a naik and a file of sepoys bayonets at the charge.

The man in the door leaned forward and blew out the candle.

"Excuse me!" he said. . . . "I don't know if you fellows were expecting me?"

The lank youth in the cloak, who was evidently in charge, answered.

"Well, sir, a sowar of the Guides came along with some sort of verbal message at dusk. I was out; and I couldn't quite make out from the havildar what it was all about. He said the man seemed in a hurry and went off at a great bat."

They showed their visitor in to the little room that served as mess, and introduced themselves. The tall lad was Lumsden of the 77th Ludhiana Sikhs, and the other Chamberlain of the same regiment.

"Chamberlain's come out to relieve me, sir," Chubby explained. "I go back to Peshawar to-morrow—if I'm alive," he added under his breath.

Their visitor told them his business.

"The Chief's a bit worried. He asked me to look in and see how you were getting on. How are things?"

"Pretty quiet so far to-night, sir," replied the melancholy Chub. "There was a little nagging in the Pass during the day."

"They stuck little Lala up on a rock and were making target practice at him from noon to dewy eve," chimed in the cheerful Tubby. "They only knocked off when they could no longer see the target."

"How is little Lala?" asked the visitor solicitously.

Chubby, relapsing into the silence of the introvert, left his junior to reply.

"Why, sir, nicely on the whole, thank-you—or rather as well as can be expected in the circumstances. At noon an old woman driving a donkey brought *that* to the Fort." He produced from the shelf a neat little card-board box lined with camel's wool. In the box reposed a dark object that looked like a dried fig.

"Little Lala's ear," Tub explained briskly. "And in the box was this chit in best Urdu purporting to come from Ibrahim Khan to say that unless the blood-money was paid down by dusk he'd send along another sample of prime bunniah served up on toast."

Old For-ever examined the specimen and the chit. Then he leaned back and laughed.

"How like old Ibrahim Khan!" he said. "I can see him preparing his specimen. *That's* a bit of carefully selected calf's innards."

Tubby was slightly ruffled, but he was able to indulge in reprisals, which he did with urbane complacency.

"That chit's a fake, sir," he said. "It's Kadir the Raider who's got the bunniah not Ibrahim Khan."

His visitor turned on him almost sharply.

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely, sir." The lad spoke with almost aggressive confidence.

"What's your evidence?"

Tubby was not to be shaken.

"Just before sundown he poked his head over a rock in the mouth of the Pass about two hundred yards away and hailed us."

Chubby here butted in with a certain sombre gusto.

"Said the stake had been sharpened and set in the hillside ready for to-morrow's performance, and Lalla's eyebrows already singed."

He relapsed into gloomy contemplation.

"And if we wanted our bunniah back to our bosoms we'd better look nippy with the cash as he meant to get to work on him at dawn," continued Tubby brightly. "Sit him on the stake, adjust him to a nicety, settle him down with a few nice taps on the crumpet from' a mallet"—he acted it—"and then hand him over to the ladies to play with."

Old For-ever interrupted the boy's genial flow.

"Did anybody *see* Kadir?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Two of my men," Chubby replied.

"I should like a word with them?"

A naik and a sepoy were brought in. The sepoy, it seemed, had been on sentry on the roof when the raider had challenged from behind a rock.

"Thou sawest him?"

"Of very truth, sahib."

"Dost thou know him of old?"

"Surely, sahib. I saw him the night of the raid. Almost I had him in these two arms, so hot was my pursuit. Only as I reached to thrust him through with my bayonet I slipped and he escaped me." Solemnly he wagged his head. "There is but one Kadir, the Raider, sahib. And there is no mistaking him: for he is black and terrible to look upon. And he has but one eye that grows out of the middle of his face—just here!—like the hub of a wheel."

Old For-ever turned to the naik, a veteran of many years' service, who, summoned to the roof by the sepoy, had brought his glasses to bear on the man behind the rock. The naik was positive the man was Kadir, whom he knew well by sight: for he had been on the lines of communication in the Kurram during the War and then had often seen the famous raider. His quiet was convincing.

The men dismissed, Old For-ever turned to the boys with cheerful decision.

"That settles *that*," he said. "Kadir's in the Pass. Though how he got there and what he's after beats me."

"He's after cash," replied Tubby, almost disrespectful in his dogmatism. "Not much doubt about that—and mighty keen about it too."

"What makes you think that?"

"Why, sir. He came along again after dark. Said he knew the Sirkar was poor after the

War and the sack of Peshawar, and he didn't want to be hard on us. So of his graciousness he would take five thousand rupees instead of the original ten thousand,—if we'd pay the money down."

The visitor listened keenly.

"O, he said that, did he?"

"Yes, sir; and if we'd put the money in a bag on the rock during the night we'd find the bunniah sitting on the same rock, crowned with glory and honour, when the morning broke."

"What did you say?"

"We chaffed him. Said we'd only two annas amongst us, and one of those was spurious."

"What happened?"

"Why, he came bang out from behind the rock, said he couldn't wait—and what would we give for the bunniah?—cash down, there and then?"

"Well?"

Tubby wrapped his dressing-gown about him like the toga of a Roman Emperor.

"I took it upon myself to say on behalf of my Government that if he'd bring the bunniah to the door—and I'd give him a safe passport—I'd pay into his hand the two annas above-mentioned."

"And then?"

"He said some things about my mother and sister that were in doubtful taste and fired at the Fort and vanished."

The other eyed him closely.

"He mentioned nothing but the money?"

"Nothing, sir."

"No talk about a woman."

"No, sir—apart from his uncalled-for remarks on my people."

Old For-ever took up his pen and wrote a brief note to the Chief with a grim little pucker-ing of the lips.

Kadir is on the run—probably from his own folk—and will not be long in the Pass. Will write more when I've been through it.

As he blotted his note he continued his cross-examination.

"Is Kadir alone or with a gang, think you?"

Chubby would not commit himself. He sat in morose and jealous silence. His junior on the other hand plunged with characteristic confidence.

"Alone, sir."

The lad's directness and audacity pleased his interrogator. He gave the boy an encouraging nod.

"How do you arrive at that?"

"Why, sir, the Subadar-Major of Pank's came through the Pass this morning from Kohat when I was out with Peter and the gun. He could never have got through if Kadir had been in strength."

The other nodded and continued his cross-examination.

"You don't think any men from Matanni have joined him?"

"Some did I believe, sir, when he came

through on his way back from the raid two months since. But none now."

"I've just passed through it," said Old For-ever. "It's deserted of men."

"It would be, sir," Tubby replied. "They've a punitive party of police stationed on them. Last night there was a free fight. We heard it all. The police won hands down. You see Matanni *was* allowed some rifles being so near the Border. But after the raid the deputy-inspector came along and took em away. So when the shooting began in earnest the young men decamped and are hiding up in the nullahs till better times come."

Old For-ever put on his gloves.

"Thank-you," he said. "Any news of Kohat and the cholera trickled through?"

"Plenty, sir, of a sort," the boy replied. "Pank's Punjabis are in a bad way if the rumours are true."

"They're going through hell," muttered Chubby.

Old For-ever rose.

"They are," he said. "I'm Pank's. The Subadar-Major came for me. They've got it bad. I'm going back to em. That's why I'm here."

At that the lank Chubby rose like a spectre from the grave. He was gaunt, aghast, his eyes goggling behind his spectacles.

"You're never going through the Pass to-night, sir!" he cried.

His senior smiled.

"I am," he replied. "And you're going to help me. There's a camel-sowar of Skinner's Horse and a riding camel waiting for me here—or ought to be."

There was a silence.

"They're in the serai, sir," said Tubby at length reluctantly.

"Right," said Old For-ever. "I'll go and dig em out. Don't you fellows bother to come. If you could lend me a lantern!"

Tubby went to a cupboard and produced the required article. Chubby, scowling and miserable, stood over him, muttering protests in his ear. A whispered conversation took place between the two boys.

"You know what my orders are—to let no one through the Pass."

"I can't help it. . . ."

"All very well for you. . . ."

"Well, you can't stop a man like that. He's centuries your senior."

Slightly perturbed himself, and querulous because of it, Tubby stood with his back turned, busy trimming the lamp. Then he turned.

"Here you are, sir."

CHAPTER XXVIII

MARION DECIDES

OLD FOR-EVER left the boys still holding muttered counsel together and went out into the gate-way of the Fort, lantern in hand.

At one end was the great iron door, bullet-proof, with the guard-room at hand, and the sepoys on duty, loitering about, fully armed. At the other end the light of the lantern fell on the piled dead thorn of the low zareeba that blocked the entrance to the serai, which as in most posts on the Frontier was within the Fort itself.

Within the serai a pi-dog growled, a turkey-cock bubbled in his sleep, a camel-foal whinnied softly for its dam.

Then the hedge parted and out marched the Subadar-Major, leading by the ear the sleepy and resentful camel-sowar, who in his turn dragged by the rope-bridle his soft-footed beast, sleepy and resentful as himself.

His Colonel shewed himself annoyed.

"I left the memsahib outside in thy charge, Subadar-Major Sahib," he said sharply. "Thou shouldst not have quitted her until I came."

"All is well, sahib," the old native-officer replied gently. "There is no one about. I

made sure before I entered. Lal Singh and the bearer are with the memsahib. Also the tonga is covered by the rifles of the Fort. And I bade the havildar of the inlying picquet fall in his men and keep the door a-jar. *Open the doors!*" he called imperiously to the guard. "*Chalo! Wouldst keep the Colonel Sahib waiting? The matter is urgent. We must on. Our regiment is dying in Kohat.*"

There was a stir amongst the men on duty who opened the iron doors cautiously standing by the while with fixed bayonets to prevent a rush. But the Subadar-Major was right. There was nobody about ; and Old For-ever, striding eagerly out of the gate-way into the open under the sky, saw to his relief the tonga standing in the road just as he had left it, still as stone and black in the moonlight, with Lal Singh holding his pony, and the bearer perched on the roof.

He walked over to it.

"All well, Tom?" came the quiet voice of Marion from her covert.

"I think so," her husband answered in the same hushed tones. He leaned forward. "The only thing is this, my dear. Kadir *is* in the Pass."

Marion regarded him with steady eyes. In her heart she was thanking him for taking her into his confidence and treating her frankly like a man and a comrade who shares the risks of an adventure and is therefore entitled to know what those risks are.

"Shall you go on?" she asked.

He was surprised and showed it.

"I!" he said. "I must. But what about you, my dear?" He was tentative. "Wouldn't you rather stop in the Fort to-night and go back to Peshawar to-morrow? There are two boys here of the 77th Sikhs—decent lads, both: Rugby and Winchester I think their Colonel told me. They'd amuse you. And I've no doubt they could make you up some sort of shake-down for the night."

"We'll go with you," answered Marion, hugging her bundle and digging her chin stubbornly into it as she rocked. "We'll be together—all three."

Her husband was obviously relieved.

"Thank-you," he said. "Quite honestly I don't believe there'll be any trouble whatever. Kadir's alone to the best of my belief. And at the worst—well we're five armed men, and should take a bit of stopping."

"Any news of the regiment?" Marion asked in hushed voice.

"Only the ordinary trickles of rumour—exaggerated one hopes. Nothing definite."

He walked away swiftly down the road to Maharaj Singh, who was paying off the camel-wallah from Khost with kicks and curses and a handful of rupees that made a glittering pool of silver as he poured them on the ground. The sirwan on his hands and knees beside the pool grubbed up the coins, and then led his beast away, hulking and ominous as himself, towards

the Fort, cursing all Kafirs and Feringhis as he went.

The iron doors were still a-jar, and in them could be seen the two English subalterns taking counsel together: Chubby feverishly seeking advice, Tubby giving it lavishly as he swung the tassel of his dressing-gown with a non-chalance he did not feel.

Old For-ever was aware of them but paid no heed. He was watching the Subadar-Major and camel-sowar saddle the Bikaneri raider.

Just then there was a diversion. A deep and charming voice struck the thrilled silence like the note of a silver bell.

"Tom!" it called.

The two lads in the door ceased to parley.

"My God! What's that in the tonga?" came the voice of Chubby, staccato with the over-emphasis of the neurotic.

He plunged suddenly forward assuming an air of fierce authority, as exaggerated as had been his former diffidence.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but who's in that tonga?"

Old For-ever met him with his amused smile.

"My wife."

The boy, perturbed before, was terrified now.

"You're never going to take your wife through the Pass at this time of night with things like this!" he cried.

"I am," replied the other. "But I'm forgetting my manners. Come and be introduced!" He led the way. "Marion, this is Mr. Lumsden

of the 77th Ludhiana Sikhs ; and the modest gentleman in the dressing-gown trailing behind is Mr. Chamberlain of the same regiment. Both of them are lending us every assistance in their power."

Marion leaned forward, her bundle in her arms.

" I can't shake hands, Mr. Lumsden," she smiled. " You see I'm engaged."

Marion had a way with boys as some women have with young stock. Amongst them she became a girl herself, showing a demure and quiet charm, a deep and reasoning sympathy, that surprised the elders and held the lads themselves in noble bondage to her spirit. Tubby, as always equal to the emergency, gathered his gown about him with an air and bowed with superb self-possession. But his senior, distraught by the burthen of his responsibilities, forgot himself.

" Good God, Tub ! there's a baby !" he gasped.

He stood with his lantern and his cloak, wavering in the moonlight, and looking like a sexton uncertain whether to bury someone he has murdered by mistake.

" Well, you can't help it if there is, man," whispered Tub, practical and brisk. " Do the hospitable for any sake. Ask her in. She's a lady, hang it !" He dug his friend in the lean ribs with his elbow.

Chubby stepped forward gingerly, his cloak dripping about his long shoulders. He thought he spied his chance.

"I say!" he called in his high flat voice, halting at a safe distance. "Won't you get down? Sleep the night with me—us—I mean—and that. You know." He added in a burst of confidence, feeling perhaps that he could convey the prohibition more easily to the woman. "You see, you can't go any further I'm afraid."

"I'm afraid we mustn't to-night," Marion answered in her low voice. "We've got to push on. My husband has to be with the regiment at Reveille! Isn't that so, Tom?"

She appealed to her husband.

"At latest," Tom answered briefly.

The lad turned to him.

"Good heavens, sir! . . . You're never going to take that child through the Pass!" he almost screamed.

"I'm not," replied Old For-ever quietly. "His mother is."

"But my orders are absolutely definite. . . ."

"So are mine."

"Well, sir. I'm very sorry—"

He was becoming vehement to the point of insolence.

His junior gripped him by the arm and lugged him aside.

"Don't be an ass, Chub!"

"I must!"

"O, rot!"

"My responsibility. Not yours."

"O, shut up!"

Their voices rose as they wrangled.

Marion held up an appealing finger.

"O, please ! You'll wake him !" she urged.
"And he's been *so* good."

At that moment the child gave a tiny cry in its sleep. The noise, so small, and so pathetic, issuing into the immeasurable night and losing itself there like a drop in the ocean, smote the little group into awed silence.

"There !" said Old For-ever in shocked and accusing tones.

"That's you, Chub !" said Tub.

"Well, I'm very sorry," muttered Chub.

"Has he waked him ?" asked the father ominously.

Marion lifted the light handkerchief that covered the child's face. Both boys stared—Chubby in horror, Tubby, who meant to be a father himself some day, with keen interest.

"Little brick !" he murmured. "Little Briton !" He threw up an insinuating glance at Marion. "Now I suppose if you and the Colonel must go on you couldn't leave the baby with me. A kind of compromise ! "

Marion threw back her head and poured forth torrents of low laughter, in which her husband and even Chubby joined.

"I'm sure you're an authority on babies, Mr. Chamberlain," she said. "But I'm afraid it wouldn't quite do."

Tubby turned his defeat into instant victory.

"Then you'll come in and have some tea, won't you ? "

Old For-ever beckoned Lal Singh to bring up his pony.

"I'm afraid we can't do that," he said in his quiet voice. "Every minute's precious." He mounted.

"Half a mo then, sir!" said Tub. He picked up his dressing-gown like a skirt, and shuffled back to the Fort.

His senior turned dolefully to the man on the pony.

"I say, sir!" he began nervously. "I'm very unhappy about this. I really am."

"Quite," said Old For-ever. . . . "That saddle'll ride forward unless you tighten the girth, Subadar-Major Sahib."

" . . . You see sir, I'm responsible; and my orders are categorical"—it was a big word and strength came to the lad through using it—"categorical, that I'm to let no one through."

"Quite," replied the other. "And when I send in my report I shall be able to tell Sir Rutherford Gore that you carried out your orders categorically without fear or favour."

"You see if it was only yourself, sir!" pleaded the boy.

"I know," replied the other sympathetically. "That's just it. You see I'm under discipline myself. Man proposes, woman opposes—isn't that it? You'll know all about it yourself when you're married."

The lad saw that he was beaten. He threw down his arms.

"Well, sir, what *am* I to do?" he cried in desperate appeal.

The man on the pony mused.

"What about firing on us?" he suggested.

"What on a woman and a baby!" cried Chubby.

At that moment Tubby hustled up bearing a tray.

"Swill for you, Mrs. Oliver, and sweets for the baby!" he panted triumphantly.

"But *how* kind!" cried Marion, stripping off her gloves.

"Or say you surrendered to *force majeure*," continued the tormentor, tapping his boot with his riding switch. "I don't honestly see myself what officers even of the 77th Ludhiana Sikhs, and one of them in a dressing-gown, can do against an armed party of desperadoes like ours."

The boy gave up the battle.

"They'll break me for this sure as guns," he muttered.

Maharaj Singh mounted now; and the camel heaved up into the night with its double burthen. Old For-ever turned to the disconsolate subaltern.

"Cheer up, Lumsden," he said. "You're all right. I'll see you through. We're a party under escort. Your orders don't apply to such. . . . Hop up, Lal Singh, and watch that tonga-wallah!"

The young Sikh leapt to his place beside the driver, and the Subadar-Major stalked off down the slope into the Pass. The tonga-wallah wrapt his pagri about his lower face and followed surly.

"If only you'd let your wife sleep the night with me, sir," urged Chubby, walking at the horseman's stirrup.

"I couldn't do that thank-you, Mr. Lumsden," coldly.

The boy drew aside to let the tonga pass.

"We could make you up a decent sort of bed, Mrs. Oliver."

"Between us," put in the gallant Tub.

"I'm sure you could, Mr. Lumsden," said Marion. "But not to-night, thank-you."

CHAPTER XXIX

IN THE PASS

IT was just after midnight as the party dropped down into the hollow of the Pass. The light lay like dew on the wan uplands and strewed the bed of the defile, patched here and there with the shadows of thorns and rocks.

Old For-ever laughed as the hills closed in on him, and an occasional tower showed to right or left.

"Capital," he said, looking at his watch.
"We're through the worst now."

"How well you lie, Tom!" said Marion demurely.

"Well, I had to," he answered gruffly. "Must put the regiment first."

"I admired you *so* much," she continued, soothing him.

He turned the conversation.

"How are you?" he asked.

"I'm all right," she answered. Her confidence gave him strength. And in fact he had very little fear. They were indeed a formidable little party; five armed men, if the mutinous camel-sowar was included, four of them born to arms and expert in the use of them. No

occasional outlaw would dare waylay them. Only organized opposition on a considerable scale had to be feared ; and of that he had little expectation.

He glanced forward. The Subadar-Major's head and shoulders nodded against the brilliant night. He had turned up the black fur collar of his poshteen about his ears ; while his left hand, deep-thrust into his pocket, clutched his god. Lal Singh, who had got down as the road grew worse, marched beside the tonga. Overhead on the tilt, squatting cross-legged like an idol and framed in stars, was the bearer, his rifle thrown across his lap. Old For-ever himself jogged at the tail of the tonga, his revolver flopping against his hip. The military formation amused him.

"It's like convoy-work in Afghanistan," he chuckled.

"Only less dangerous," commented Marion.

She was determined to reassure him, but there was no need. His spirits were surging starward on a billow of hope and faith. He put his hand in his pocket, pulled out his penny-whistle, and laid it to his lips, fingering it tenderly.

"I feel like playing," he said.

"Better not Tom," murmured Marion, a trifle shocked.

He laughed but thrust the pipe back whence it came.

"All right," he said. "Only I feel as if I was twenty and want to jump out of my skin."

The keen night air, the adventure, exhilarated him. He felt as full of mischief as a kitten. Like a boy playing at hide-and-seek he peeped past the tonga.

"I can see a long way down the pass, old Marion," he announced. "There ain't so much as a ruddy jack-ass in sight. All's quiet as an English country lane. How's the babe?"

"Great."

"Still asleep?"

"Like the dead, with its thumb corking its mouth."

"Despite the bumps?"

"Yes: the thumb makes up for everything. You see it's against orders generally. Bobs is enjoying the pleasure of law-breaking—like his father and mother."

For once Marion was talking to keep herself company.

Bad as the road in British territory had been, here in the Pass it was worse. Soon indeed it degenerated into a track, and then ceased to be. A pace more rapid than a walk was out of the question. Once the tonga stopped and Lal Singh engaged in a vehement altercation with the driver. Then a distant shot was heard down the Pass. Tom glanced at Marion. Her face was calm and still.

"Of no public interest," he remarked. "It's a nice night to settle a blood-feud."

A second shot rang out; and he found himself wondering whether it was just the belated echo of the first.

"Chalo, tonga-wallah ! Chalo !" he called briskly.

For all answer the tonga stopped, and the muffled driver jumped down, the reins in his hand. The altercation between him and Lal Singh renewed itself more violently. The bearer slithered down and joined in.

Old For-ever drew rein.

"I shall let them settle him if they can," he told his wife. "The God-on-Olympus business is the white man's rôle." He took out his pipe and began to polish it.

Then Maharaj Singh came riding back at a trot.

"Madmen all !" he scolded in a whisper. "What is this hoo-ha? Are you monkeys or men? Do you wish to have every man in the valley out of his tower to see?"

"The swine says he will go no further," Lal Singh explained.

"He says Kadir the Cruel who stones men to death waits in front ; and that was his rifle."

The Subadar-Major leaned fiercely down, knife in hand.

"Why wilt thou go no further, shaitan ? "

"My ponies do not like the Pass," the tonga-wallah muttered surlily. "They tell me there are devils in it. Myself I do not know : for I am not of this country."

"Thou toldest me thou wast a Pathan."

"I lied because of the fierceness of Huzur's beard and the fear in me," the fellow replied. "I will go no further."

"Whether thou goest or whether thou stayest is nothing to me, be-iman!" the Subadar-Major answered loftily. "But thy tonga goes to the end of the journey. And at the end of it if thou art not there I will sell it for fire-wood and give thy ponies for meat to the jackals whose brethren they are. Lal Singh, do thou take the place of this monkey stuffed with saw-dust and drive on!"

The young Sikh seized the reins and was about to mount, when the tonga-wallah, seeing he was worsted, shoved him aside and remounted sullenly.

"My ponies have done 60 miles already to-day," he muttered. "This white pony in the shafts tells me his heart is dead. What is the good then? They cannot climb the kotal at the end of the Pass, should we ever reach so far with whole wind-pipes. It is steep as the wall of a mosque."

"Thou wilt not be asked to climb the kotal," said the Subadar-Major from his high perch. "When thou hast reached the foot of the kotal thy work is done. Others will take up the honourable burthen thou carryest so ungraciously."

"And I shall be left to drive home alone in the chill of the morning down the Pass and have my young throat cut by these swine of Pathans," whimpered the man.

The camel-sowar leaned down, dark-faced.

"Dost thou call *my* people soor, soor thyself!" he shouted, and slashed at the face of

the tonga-wallah with a short length of rope he carried as a whip. "Haramzada, that had but one grandfather and grandmother, and they brother and sister!—Well I know them and thee."

The Subadar-Major raised a pontifical hand to allay the storm.

"Best it will be for thee to come quietly before a worse thing befall thee, O tonga-wallah!" he said. "As to the rest thou canst come through to Kohat with us if thou wouldest not return the way thou hast come."

Then the sahib chimed in.

"Tell him that next time a cavalry escort goes through from Kohat I'll send him back with it."

"Yea," said the camel-sowar over his shoulder as he started his beast forward. "And I will be on that escort, and the Pathan squadron of my regiment. And when we come to a fitting place we will not forget thee and what thou calledst us, thou soor, and son of a soor!"

The cavalcade started on its way once more.

Old For-ever looked at Marion with his amused smile.

"Nothing like a common enemy to make men friends," he said low. "That camel-sowar will die for us now." He peeped at Bobs.

"The boy sleeps through the pow-wow?"

"They might be sparrows on the roof-top for all he heeds."

"Turn his face this way so that I can see him."

Marion did ; and he saw the round face, solid as an apple and soaked in sleep.

The father laughed in his pride.

They passed the sprawling village where now stands the tribesmen's rifle-factory. Nobody stirred. Somewhere a late reveller was playing the bag-pipes and playing them well.

Old For-ever listened with interest and pleasure as the reel turned into the strathspey and the strathspey into the march.

"That's the old Pipe-major of the Guides, I'll swear," he said to Marion. "He was an Afridi, I remember. Many's the time I've seen him swaggering round the table after mess at the head of his pipers blowing fit to burst himself and taking up his place behind the Commandant's chair."

Half a mile past the village the tonga lurched to a sudden halt. Old For-ever peered down the road. The Subadar-Major had stopped. He was pointing to a great boulder lying in a pool of shadow back from the track. Then he stole quietly forward once more.

The horseman drove his pony up alongside the tonga-wallah. But there was no need to urge. The tonga-wallah had seen.

Under the great boulder, in and out of the shadow it threw, three skull-capped tribesmen, their rifles slung on their backs, were squatting. They were playing cards, dealing them out in the moonlight, and so immersed in their play that they did not hear, or if they heard did not heed, the party on the road.

Old For-ever laughed.

"A clear fire, a clean hearth, and the rigour of the game!" he quoted.

The track improved, and the pace with it. Even the ponies seemed to take heart.

Then somebody shouted. It was Maharaj Singh calling over his shoulder and pointing.

"The children!" he cried.

Old For-ever leaned forward and saw a fire leaping and flickering half-a-mile ahead at the foot of the kotal.

"Our fellows!" he told his wife, a faint thrill of pride in his voice. "I suppose Pollok's sent a picquet into the Pass on chance to meet us. How like him!"

"That's right," was all Marion said; but the way she sighed told of her relief.

Just then the camel in front, gathering speed as if it too was glad, shied and stopped dead.

Old For-ever marked the sudden flash of a bared knife in the hand of the Subadar-Major, and heard the hoarse, excited bark of the camel-sowar.

He gave Marion a reassuring nod, pressed the black stallion, and plunged forward. As he shot past the camel, the sowar leaned down and pointed forward.

"Kadir, sahib!" he called hoarsely.

In the middle of the track just in front a man lay.

Delicately the horseman rode forward, revolver in hand; and was aware of the Subadar-Major,

who had slipped down, padding swiftly after him on soft feet.

"Be wary, sahib!" whispered the old native officer urgently. "Maybe he foxes!"

But there was nothing to fear. The man lay widespread on his back with a hole through his throat. His hand grasped his Kabul-made rifle; his one eye, still open, gazed up blankly at the moon. A sunken gash where the other should have been put his identity beyond doubt.

Kadir the Raider would never trouble the Border more.

CHAPTER XXX

THE HOLD-UP

OLD FOR-EVER who had dismounted and now stood beside the dead man looked back at the tonga. Marion was peeping round the tilt.

He put his hand to his mouth.

"It's all right, my dear," he called.

As though in answer from the bed of the stream upon the right came a challenge, clear and ominous in the night.

"Hoo kum dar?"

The Subadar-Major turned instantly to meet it, holding up his hand.

"Friend!" he sang out.

"Hallut, Friend!" came back the challenge, a threat in it.

The Englishman remounted and sat motionless in the saddle.

"Te sok yo! (Who are you!) " asked a rough voice in Pushtu.

"I am Sheikh Akbar of Abazai, Subadar-Major of Pank's Punjabis—formerly of the Afridi Company," replied the old Sikh calmly.

The man on the black stallion bowed his chin upon his chest and waited. Would the camel sowar give his enemy away? Would he

be true to his salt? The question was answered almost before it has been framed.

"That is truth, bhai," gurgled the man perched on the camel a few yards down the road. "I am Nasrulla Ali of the same village, now a camel-sowar in the Pathan Squadron of Skinner's Harruz. And I know."

It was a good lie, the Englishman noted with grim approval, and well-told, with a sort of surly reluctance that gave it the stamp of truth. If they got through he should compliment the Colonel of Skinner's Horse on his admirable training of his men.

The Subadar-Major lifted up his voice afresh.

"And thou too, unless I mistake, hast served in the army of the Sirkar!" he called with the courtesy no man could assume with more grace. "Gladly would I know with whom I hold pleasant communication thus beneath the moon."

There was a pause and the mutter of men, behind a boulder. It was plain that here was some sort of picquet watching probably the camp-fire at the foot of the kotal.

Then the voice began again, in it now a touch of parade-ground deference.

"Salaam, 'Major Sahib. I am Badshah Gul, lance - duffadar of the 17th Cavalry — Afridi squadron."

"Thou hast cut thy name belike?"

"Thou speakest truth, Major Sahib. Last autumn after the War I cut my name and came home to my father's tower."

The Subadar-Major's sonorous voice went echoing across the way.

"Well I know the 17th Cavalry. Did we not serve together in the Devajat in the seventies?—Was I not at Bannu with them before the War?—And did not my regiment lie alongside them in Sherpur last winter?"

"What is thy regiment, Major Sahib?"
"Pank's Punjabis."

At that the man came out eagerly from behind a rock and stood exposed in the moonlight: a shaven-headed tribesman, very tall, an old rezai about his shoulders, and his rifle tucked like an umbrella under his arm.

He put his hand to his brow as though to get a better view.

"Pank's Punjabis?" he called, emotion in his voice. He was about to come forward, when unseen hands from behind the rock clutched his ankle and restrained him forcibly.

"Even so, brother," Maharaj Singh replied. "Maybe thou rememberest them?"

"Remember them!" cried the tribesman. "Was it not Pank's Punjabis who brought help to the cavalry that day at the Deh-i-mazang tangi when we stood a handful of us on the plain against a host like the sea in multitude?"

"Wah! Wah!" said the Subadar-Major. "So Pank's were able to do thee a good turn that day, Badshah Gul?"

"Of a truth but for them Badshah Gul would not be here to-day, 'Major Sahib!'" the other answered. "He would be lying unburied on

the plain with desecrated body the Afghan women had worked their will upon. Yea, dead should I be and glad of it, I wot, after a three months dying—dead and without hope of dealing with my enemy."

"Thou hast a blood-feud to settle, Badshah Gul?" Maharaj Singh enquired courteously.

There was a moment's pause.

"Thou hast said it, 'Major Sahib,'" the tribesman answered not without a touch of modest complacency. "It is he who lies so still at thy feet."

"Kadir the Raider!"

"Even so, 'Major Sahib.'"

"Shabash, Badshah Gul!" said Maharaj Singh. "He was a very evil man surely."

The man was pleased and showed it.

"Yea, Kadir the Raider has eaten my bullet. He has chewed it in the throat. Never again will he raid Peshawar City, or torture women, or trouble the Border, because of the good work God and His Prophet have enabled me to work upon him." He salaamed gravely. "And that surely should mean great glory and large reward for Badshah Gul: for it is worth many lakhs of rupees to the Sirkar to be rid of this renowned budmash who blackened the faces of the sahibs and put them to shame before all men."

"That should surely be," answered the old Sikh. "For the Sirkar never forgets those who serve it. But how camest thou to do this deed of great renown, Badshah Gul?"

The man came forward eagerly.

" Thus, Major Sahib. Kadir took my sister away from our village against my father's will and married her. Then my brother went after her to Dargai and was killed by treachery. And that made mischief while I was at the War. But my sister stayed with Kadir, the slimy one, whose relations with his mother were well known throughout Tirah, until he tired of her as was his way with women, and did to her as thou mayest have heard. But after the slaying of my brother, my father, being now an old man and unable himself to right the wrong, sent for me in God's name to take up the family heritage. Then when we came back from the War I saw my Colonel and asked leave to go home and settle the matter—*urgen famlee fairs*, I told him. And his Honour was pleased to grant permission to his humble servant by reason of the good service I rendered during the War. So I came home to my father's tower. And this very night God has been good to me and given me my opportunity as thou seest, 'Major Sahib, so that I have dealt with the enemy of my father's house according to his deserts. May he sleep in peace!' he added piously. 'Verily Allah does not forget his servants who serve him faithfully.'

The Subadar-Major, prompted by his Colonel, put a further question.

" How came Kadir in the Pass seeing that all was not well between him and Ibrahim Khan and thy tribe? " he asked.

" It was this way, 'Major Sahib,' the man

replied. "Kadir the Raider was a mean man. After the sack of Peshawar City he would not share the loot among his people as they desired. Also the women turned against him because of his cruelty to them and their children." He continued philosophically, "According to thy creed and mine, 'Major Sahib, the women count for little in this world and nothing in the next. Yet it seems to me they are like the ants—a small people surely yet mighty in their works. And of a truth it is well to be friends with them. So now because of them and the hatred that they had raised against him Kadir fled from his own country with money on his head and hid in the Pass."

Then another man, a bearded elder, appeared, standing outlined upon the rock.

"What doest thou in the Pass?" he asked harshly.

"Our regiment has the cholera, O Mullah."

"So we have heard," the other answered more gently. "Is that why thy regiment has moved into camp at the mouth of the Pass?"

"Even so, O Mullah. I rode through the Pass on a trotting camel at noon to fetch our Colonel."

"With mine own eyes did I see him," chimed in Badshah Gul, the garrulous.

"Maybe it was thou who hadst a shot at me, Badshah Gul!" chaffed Maharaj Singh.

"That is possible, 'Major Sahib,'" replied the other. "I was lurking for Kadir, knowing him to be in the Pass; but I saw only thee. So

I looked down my rifle at thee. No courtesy was meant to thee, 'Major Sahib. But did I hit thee? "

"Thou smotest my camel on the hinder parts so that his legs became wings, yea, the wings of an eagle," the Subadar-Major replied.

The Pathan was pleased as a child.

"But that was good shooting, 'Major Sahib,'" he purred. "For the range was full four hundred yards. Of a truth I have added to the izzat of my regiment. Can they in Pank's shoot like that—infantry though they be. For we of the rissala, the lance is our true weapon."

"Our Colonel can, I assure thee," said the Subadar-Major.

"Is that Allah-faug-ecka Sahib, who plays upon the little pipe?" asked Badshah Gul keenly—"the sahib who trots like a camel, as my people say?"

"Yea, surely, Badshah Gul. He commanded us that day at the Deh-i-mazang tangi. That is he on the black stallion."

Old For-ever rode forward a pace.

"Salaam, Mullah!" he said gravely. "Salaam, Badshah Gul! Stehla manzig! (Don't be tired!)"

Curious heads peeped round the boulder to see the famous warrior.

"Who hides in the tonga?" asked the Mullah suspiciously—"Soldiers of the Sirkar?"

"Nay, O Mullah!" the Subadar-Major replied. "In the tonga is only the Colonel's memsahib and his baba come in haste through

thy country by night to succour the regiment which is dying of cholera—and most of all the Afridi company."

Marion spoke.

"Salaam, Badshah Gul!" she called.

The voice of the memsahib, emerging clear and unexpected from the tonga, seemed to throw a spell upon the tribesmen as well it might, and disarm them.

They held fresh counsel among themselves behind the rock. Voices were raised. Words and phrases, vehement if hushed, came through to the listeners. The Mullah clearly was for holding up the cavalcade; Badshah Gul for letting them proceed.

The Subadar-Major stood as he had done throughout the interview, holding his god surreptitiously in his hand, alternately flicking open the lid and shutting it too again. There was silence now behind the rock, only broken by the snap of the catch of the jack-in-the-box. Eyes were watching; ears listening.

"What is that in thy hand?" came the harsh voice of the Mullah at last.

The Subadar-Major stood in the track, meek as a school-boy caught out, eating sweets in school.

"It is my god, O Mullah!" he answered, meek and shamefaced. "It is the god who leaps and peeps."

Again there was a bobbing up of curious heads from behind the boulder, accompanied by hushed whisperings.

"What is that sound as of a trigger snapping off?" asked the Mullah, censorious and suspicious still.

"It is but the spring that works my god," replied the abashed Subadar-Major almost querulous now.

A young man raised his head high above the rock and had a prolonged stare.

"It is a small jinn who lives in a coffin and comes alive after being dead," he announced. "Behold! I can see his head lolling from the bier!" He gasped and ducked. "Now he is dead!" Wah, brothers!—Now he is alive again!—That surely is a miracle."

There came an excited mutter of voices.

"It would be well not to touch this man!"

"Truly spoken, Yakub Khan."

"I love not jinns, especially those that live in coffins and poke forth the head when called upon."

"Of a certainty this is not a thing for simple men to meddle with."

Only the moulvic remained obdurate, though he too was clearly shaken.

"There is a picquet of thy men under the kotal," called the Mullah. "And there are others on the road up the steep. What meanest this?"

"They are men of my regiment, O Mullah, come without arms in their hands to carry the memsahib in a doolie up the hill. Such is her haste to return to the regiment of which she is the mother."

The men came out now from behind the boulder. A voice called out,

"Pass on ! and may God go with thee !"
The party moved on deliberately ; and Badshah Gul's voice pursued them.

"We thought maybe the Sirkar was sending armies after Lala the bunniah, who is the guest of my cousins near by."

"Nay, nay. What is that fellow to us ?" called the Subadar-Major with fine scorn. "Cut his throat an thou wilt. And to-morrow will I send my servant's dog to lap up his blood."

The cavalcade moved off towards the kotal. Badshah Gul accompanied them, walking in the bed of the stream some fifty yards away.

Old For-ever loitered behind the crawling tonga.

"Then it was not Kadir who seized the bunniah and his caravan ?" he called.

"Nay, sahib. That was my people. We took charge of the bunniah for his own great good when news came that Kadir was in the Pass. And we have fed him on turkeys and spices and ghee, till he bursts with fatness who was never thin ; and we have guarded him with our lives as though he were the Burra Lat Sahib and we were his body-guard." He spat. "But he is a Hindu, and there is no gratitude in such men, sahib. For ill would it have gone with him had he fallen into the hands of Kadir."

"And now that Kadir is dead owing to thy great prowess, and there is no more danger, no doubt thou wilt let him go ?" said the Englishman.

"Of a surety, sahib," answered the Pathan with a grin. "Only first he must pay us the price of his keep and the heavy cost of guarding him by day and night lest an accident befall him."

The man on the pony drew rein.

"I send my salaams by thee to Ibrahim Khan, Badshah Gul," he called. "Do thou tell him I hope to see the bunniah in my camp at the foot of the kotal to-morrow. And then shortly I will come and visit him and bring him the thanks of the Sirdar and maybe a medal upon a cushion for his great services to the Sirkar."

Badshah Gul leapt on a rock and presented arms.

"Salaam, sahib!" he cried. "Thou art a Pathan. I am thy servant for always."

Old For-ever trotted on after the tonga.

"What does he say?" asked Marion, as the tribesman's voice came echoing after them.

"He says pity he does not talk English. Then could he hold pleasant conversation with the memsahib as he would like. Persian and English are the language of courts, he says, but Pushtu is the chatter of thieves. He wishes well to thee and to thy babe."

CHAPTER XXXI

THE JATS

THEY were drawing near the fire at the foot of the kotal.

There was a cry and then the patter of feet whirling down the road like leaves in an autumn gale. Ghostly figures, silent and swift, sped towards them. They passed the Subadar-Major too intent on their purpose to heed him. Then as their Colonel emerged from behind the tonga they gave tongue.

"It is he! . . . It is our father! Lo, he has come! Yea, he has come to succour his children."

They were round the man on the black stallion like hounds round the huntsman, touching him, calling to each other, looking into his face, making the inarticulate cries of puppies. One kneeled before him in the road; another kissed his coat-sleeve. He removed his cap. They gazed up into his face with adoring eyes. He tumbled off his pony into their arms, half pulled by them, and half supported.

"My Jats," he said. "We're through."

PART V

BOBS BAHADUR

CHAPTER XXXII

THE KOTAL

AT the point where the track swings to the right up the kotal, a fire of camel-dung burnt under a thorn at the roadside. Beside it lay a field ambulance doolie. And at one end of the doolie squatted a patient figure who rose as the party came up.

"Sahib!" it called in a pleading voice, faintly querulous like a child about to cry.

Old For-ever turned to see a veteran naik of the Jat company, well-known to him, standing as though chained at his post, both hands stretched out.

"Ah, old friend!" he said and went across to the man. "What is it?" and he took the other's hands in his.

The old sepoy, before almost in tears, began to laugh and show his teeth shamefacedly.

"It is nothing, sahib," he muttered. "It was only the children when they heard thy voice ran down the road to greet thee. But I, because I am naik and wear the stripes these ten years past, as well thou knowest, seeing that it was thou promotest me after Ali Khel, I could not leave my charge."

"Thou hast done as a soldier should, and even as I expect of thee, Gokula," said his Colonel. "But how went it with the regiment, old comrade, when thou left the camp?" he asked keenly.

"Well, sahib."

"The children have had a quiet day?"

"Yea, sahib."

"And to-night?"

"We know not, sahib," the naik answered with the simple truthfulness of his race, "seeing we left the camp at Retreat to take up our posts upon the road. But we think all goes well: for the picquets on the hill above us have signalled nothing. And with each picquet is a lamp and a signaller that we might talk together in the darkness, and flash the news, and so take comfort. And that reminds me. I will tell the Pathan picquet that thou art here, sahib, that they may stand to attention and be ready when thou comest."

He picked up a lantern and signalled up the hill. A light swinging against the hillside a quarter of a mile higher up the road told that the message had been received and was being handed on to the next post which caught it up in its turn and flashed it on.

The Subadar-Major slipped down from his high mount and walked stiffly across to his Colonel.

"They are not armed, sahib," he muttered, "even as I told the tribesmen in the Pass. But their pockets are stuffed with cartridges, and

the rifles are hidden in the doolie. . . . There are relays all the way up the kotal for carrying the memsahib," he continued. "I bid them leave the camp after sundown that they might take up their positions about midnight. And I placed the Jats furthest down the Pass to meet thee at the foot of the kotal, because they are precious to thee as the eyes in the face of a fair woman. And next at the pitch of the steep are the Pathans, seeing that they are themselves hill-men, and know the manner to conquer in climbing. Then, before the longest stage, are the men of my race because they are tall of the hind-leg and can stride up the hill like the cheetah. Last at the crest are the Ghurkas, who are little men truly and round in the thigh, but leap down the hill like a torrent as thou hast seen often at the khud-race. And each relay will strive against the other for the izzat of company and race. And thus great will be the speed of our going."

"Of a truth thou knowest the heart of man, Subadar-Major Sahib," said his Colonel. "And good is the bandobust that thou hast made."

The tonga drew up beside them, the ponies crawling.

"They're all out," said Old For-ever, giving them a glance. "No doubt of that. But they've done their job. . . . You'll get down, my dear, won't you?—Shall I take Bobs?"

"No," answered Marion, and handed her burthen to the orderly. "Lal Singh is ayah to my baba."

The young Sikh grinned, proud of his responsibility ; but the little group of Jats, watching shyly from the background, muttered among themselves.

"They are jealous because of the honour that has been done to Lal Singh," whispered Maharaj Singh in his Colonel's ear.

"So am I," answered his Colonel. "Tell them that."

Marion jumped down.

"My goodness ! How stiff I am—and cold !" she cried.

Four Jats drew up in the road, carrying the doolie.

Old For-ever looked at his watch. It was two o'clock.

"Not bad going," he said. "We ought to be in camp up to time. Will you get in, Marion ? "

"No, indeed I won't," she laughed. "I must stretch my legs after being cooped up so long."

"Very well," said her husband. "I will take Bobs."

He crossed to Lal Singh, but the young Sikh turned a jealous shoulder on his Colonel and whimpered.

Old For-ever laughed.

"All right," he said. "He shall carry my baba. I'll take his rifle." He shouldered the weapon. "But thou, Subadar-Major Sahib !—Wilt thou not ride in the tonga ? For thou hast ridden many miles since noon."

Maharaj Singh dismissed the suggestion with a lordly wave.

"Nay, sahib. My body is old ; but I am tough. Moreover my heart is like that of a lover now that we are through the dark Pass and dawn is at hand."

They started up the steep. Lal Singh walked in the middle carrying Bobs, escorted on either side by the father and mother of the child.

Once Old For-ever looked behind him.

The Subadar-Major was marching at his heels.

He had taken his god out of his pocket, and holding it before his face as he walked was murmuring to it, absorbed it seemed in a passion of prayer. Then he saw that he was seen and looked away deprecatory and yet obdurate, as a lover caught love-making.

"I make my thank-offering to my god who has vouchsafed to us the victory, sahib," he explained. "Surely though small he is most mighty and has hidden us this night under the shadow of his wings."

Maharaj Singh snapped the lid briskly home on the head of his god, put him back in his pocket and took his place in the marching line with a certain ostentatious swagger.

His Colonel looked down into the bed of the Pass along which they had come. Here and there on the lower slopes of the defile watch-fires spurted.

"Yes. I think we're well through that, Subadar-Major Sahib," he said with satisfaction.

"Truly said, sahib," replied the other. "It is well. Moreover Pank's Punjabis have beaten the Sirdar Sahib in open battle. And that too is well."

Swift and silent they strode up the hill. The camel stalked in front ; and the tonga lagged far behind, the driver walking now beside his ponies.

Just behind the four leaders padded the doolie men. There were eight men to the relay: four to carry, four to relieve, and the naik in charge. They were pressing on the heels of the leaders, whispering among themselves.

Maharaj Singh kept urging his Colonel to ask the memsahib to get in. But Marion refused.

"I must stretch my legs," she said.

The chattering behind became louder.

"It would be better for the memsahib to ride," whispered the Subadar-Major earnestly in his Colonel's ear. "Else these men may kill Lal Singh one day on the range by accident for revenge. For they say it is not fair. In a moment now we shall be at the Pathan post ; and the Pathans will take up the honourable burthen that the Jats have not been allowed to carry. Then the Pathans will mock, they say, and that will be bad for the izzat of the Jat company. Also Lal Singh carries Bobs baba and that is an honour for the Sikhs and for the Jats a double shame. For though the Sikhs are allied to the Jats they are jealous like

brothers. And neither likes to see the other gain the advantage."

"I think you'd better get in, Marion, or we shall have a free fight," said her husband low.

But Marion was enjoying herself.

"No," she said calmly. "I'm not going to." Her husband stopped.

"Then I must," he said and climbed into the doolie. "And I'll have Bobs too to restore the moral balance.—Lal Singh!" he called.

"The night air is too cold for Bobs baba. He must come inside with me. Do thou take the rifle."

The young Sikh shewed himself reluctant. His Colonel leaned out.

"Or shall I bid the Jats carry thy rifle for thee?"

"That shall they never!" muttered the orderly, handing over the baby and taking up his rifle.

He was the martial son of a martial race, and his weapon was more to him than even the pleasure of humiliating the Jats.

The march was resumed; Maharaj Singh peeped in on his Colonel.

"That makes for peace," he whispered. "Only Lal Singh and Gokula are saying shameful things to each other in the rear."

"Tell them I trust them both to escort the memsahib while I am in purdah," said his Colonel.

That made even the aggrieved orderly laugh. Then the men from the Pathan post came

leaping down the hill towards them with cries. The old Jat naik rushed forward and waved them back fussily.

"Keep back!" he called. "Keep back! We carry the Colonel and the Colonel's baba."

The men on the road above halted.

"He is not wounded!" they cried anxiously, peering through the darkness.

"Nay, nay. He is safe in the hands of his Jats. Were we not thrown forward down the throat of the Pass to meet and cover him? But you take not up the honourable burthen till we have come to the post! Till then the honour is ours."

At the Pathan post there was a general change; and Marion got into the doolie.

Her husband and the Subadar-Major mounted again. The long-limbed Pathans strode up the steep, tucking into their work and making nothing of it. Their Colonel watched them with pride.

"With such men we shall win through," he said to the native officer.

"It is as God wills, sahib," the other replied.

The Sikhs succeeded the Pathans, and though the road wound steeply still up towards the brow, the pace grew always better.

It was four o'clock as they reached the crest, and the bunch of Ghurkas waiting them there snatched up the doolie and went tearing smoothly down the hill at six miles an hour.

The Subadar-Major on his camel glanced back over his shoulder.

" Sahib ! " he said and pointed.

Behind them the first streak of dawn splashed the East. In the plains beneath, the mists began to lift ; and the young green wheat to show. Kohat was dimly seen amid its orchards white with bloom and its banana groves, the feet of the circling hills still dipped in cloud.

Maharaj Singh pointed to what seemed a little bed of mushrooms raising round heads at the foot of the Pass.

" Our tents," he said.

" Good," said Old For-ever. " We shall be there by Reveille."

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE CHOLERA CAMP

IT was light but very cold as they reached the plain and made down the deserted road for the camp. The smell of the dawn, fair and fresh, was in their nostrils. It was the hour of the day, and the time of the year, that makes up in part to the white man dwelling in the sun-dried plain between the Indus and the hills for the sweating horror of six months of the year.

The sun was not yet up and the dew heavy on the young wheat from which the crested larks began to spurt. Overhead a red-headed eagle soared.

A young man with shaven head and blue and white chequered skull-cap, was driving two mouse-coloured oxen along the brown path that wound through the wheat. The oxen were carrying charpoys upturned on sacks. The young man stroked their long black tails thoughtfully as he walked. A string of camels were slowly crossing the fields, wool and mustard bulging from the dirty sacks they bore. The men leading them were jolly villains in rags with bare brown chests and black and red turbans—Kabulis.

Suddenly Old For-ever rode up alongside the doolie and pulled the curtain across. A sepoy's body was lying in the dust at the roadside, twisted in knots. The man's finger-nails shewed blue. There was no question what he had died of.

The old naik stole to his Colonel's side, as if he had read his thoughts.

"He was there when we came through at dusk, sahib," he whispered. "Truly he must have wandered out here to die on the night of the terror. And the burning parties did not find him."

Not a soul stirred in the camp they were approaching; not a dog barked; not a sentry challenged. It might have been a camp of the dead. A great awe fell on all. The bearers spoke in hushed voices as men about to enter the chamber of death.

"It's very quiet," whispered Marion.

"Yes, but I think all's well," answered her husband in the same tones.

Just then as they reached the outskirts of the camp, a party of ghouls, who might have been the spirits of those that had died horribly in the night, crept out of the lines and made slowly off across the fields. Marion shuddered, almost expecting to see them take wings and flop heavily away to the places of the departed.

"The village chowkidars (night watchmen)," her husband explained.

They were old men mostly in rags, with patched quilts and rezais thrown about their

shoulders, carrying ancient jhezails, halberts, rusty lances, two-headed axes, spears, horse-pistols, even bows and arrows, that may well have graced the armoury of Jehangir.

The little procession entered the camp, and as they did so Bobs stirred in his mother's arms.

Marion bent over him and laughed.

"Well, honey!" she crooned.

His liquid black eye, bright as a bird's, smiled up at her. He chuckled and pointed a chubby finger at the man on the pony.

"Dadda!" he gurgled.

Old For-ever kissed his hand.

"May you never be tired, Sonny!" he said.

They made down the broad main-way towards the mess-tent over which drooped the regimental flag. Old For-ever riding quietly along, his eyes everywhere, marked with lifting heart that all was in perfect order even as he loved: the tent-pegs dressed as though for a parade; the lines at clean right angles; in front of each tent the neatly piled arms bristling to a point of bayonets; and at the back the chargers and transport animals duly rugged and picketed. The regiment, however terrible the punishment it had taken, had maintained its standards.

Nobody was moving yet except in the transport lines where already sleepy syces and grass-cutters began to stir about their business and carry the young green wheat, which they used as fodder, to the chargers. A mule brayed,

horses neighed. Then Old For-ever marked a young Punjabi Mahomedan with gold ear-rings and an effeminate face come out of one of the tents in the rear, sit down and begin to comb his glorious black hair, loose and long as a girl's and curling inwards at the neck, before a little hand-mirror.

The regiment was *not* dead then.

He took out his pipe and handled it feelingly. In another moment the thin strains of *Home Sweet Home* rose on the still air.

The camp stirred like a dead man about to rise. Awed voices whispered in the tents on either side as the little party led by the piper made their way down the lines.

“Wah! Wah!”

“Hark, brother!”

“What is that?”

“It is the Colonel Sahib!”

“Nay he is not here.”

“I tell thee, brother, it *is* the Colonel Sahib. Do I not know the talking of his little pipe?”

“Do we not all know it?”

“Did we not hear it in the Deh-i-mazang tangi?”

“Then he is dead. And this is his spirit come to cheer his children in the Valley of the Shadow.”

The piper on the black stallion wheeled before the mess-tent, the Subadar-Major on the camel at his right, the doolie on his left. Then Old For-ever sent his high voice resounding through the lines.

"Come, baba! . . . Come and greet your father and mother!"

The clear call served to disperse all the mists and doubts of the night. Brown faces peeped from every tent door; white-clothed bodies emerged.

"It is the Colonel Sahib!"

They came swarming out of their tents like the rats from their holes at the call of the pied piper of Hamelin. Some were in white garments, some in regimentals, most with the sleep still in their eyes, not a few with the fear yet stamped on their faces: bearded Sikhs, trans-frontier Pathans, cis-frontier Pathans, the dark Afridi type, the high-cheeked Hazara, the rosy-faced fellow of Afghan origin, the solid Jat, the merry-eyed Ghurka, the Dogra from the foot-hills in the Northern Punjab. Streaming down between the tent-lines they came running with glad eyes towards the mess-tent and the dusty little group gathered in front of it, calling to each other as they came.

Their Colonel ceased his piping.

"Greeting, children!" he called.

At that moment the sun topped the bony spine of hills through which they had come and fell on the camp. Marion stepped out into the splendour of it, her baby in her arms.

The torrent of men issuing from tents and side-walks, and pouring down towards the marquee, stopped dead. A long-drawn *Wah!* rose from their lips.

"The memsahib!"

"The Chota Sahib ! "

They salaamed and crept forward, whispering.

"Yea, of a truth. It is Frederick Roberts Sahib ! "

"The Baba knows no fear ! "

"He is not afraid of the cholera ! "

"Of a truth it will vanish away now like the mist before the sun."

The pall of horror that had overshadowed them was pulled away as by a sudden hand. They clapped their hands, danced together, wept with joy like the children that they were, shouting

"Shabash ! Shabash the baba ! "

Then Maharaj Singh rode forward on his tall camel and spoke with uplifted hands.

"Heark, brothers ! The Colonel Sahib has come ; and with him has come the memsahib and her baba to help you. They heard your call, and have answered it. Far and fast have they come. All night they travelled through the dark Pass."

"Through the dark Pass ! Wah ! Wah ! "

"Aye, through the dark Pass, as your comrades who met them there will tell you. By night they came through many dangers, for the Frontier is up, that they might be with you at dawn bearing in their arms the cup brimming with Hope to hold to your lips that you might live and might not die." He made a gesture of dismissal. "Go back to your tents with hearts as big as lions and give thanks ! The Colonel Sahib has come and all is well."

Just then a Pathan in the balloon trousers of his race stepped out of the guard-tent far down the line and putting his bugle to his lips sounded the Reveille !

CHAPTER XXXIV

DAY

THE Colonel's tent was ready pitched as always on the right of the marquee. Marion and her baby had already disappeared into it.

Old For-ever was left.

"Hullo, sir!" said a voice behind him.

"Thank God you've come, Colonel!"

He turned to find his British officers about him, most of them in shirt-sleeves, some unshaven. Their faces showed what they had been through. Even Warrior Pollok, the imperturbable man of many battles, was moved, while Puffing Billy, the youngest of them all, choked. Old For-ever took the boy by the arm, his eyes full of kindness.

"Had a rough passage, Billy?"

Billy couldn't speak.

"You look a bit fine-drawn, all of you," continued Old For-ever. "What about last night?"

"Very quiet, sir," answered Pollok. "It's every other night we're catching it, as that dam fakir prophesied."

"Where's Watch-an Ward?"

"In bed, sir. We put a sentry over his door. He's been great; but he's dead to the world."

"Good. Let him stay where he is. Billy, run over to the orderly tent and get me the morning states, there's a good lad."

The boy went and brought back the file.

The Colonel looked through it swiftly, turning in his lips.

Then a haggard unshorn man, the stigmata of his struggle with death still on him, pushed through the group of officers in his pyjamas.

Old For-ever held out his hand, his eye still running over the states.

"Hullo, Watch-an!" kindly.

"Hullo, sir. My bearer's only just told me you were here."

"How goes it!"

"Last night better. Only three deaths. Ordinarily I should say we were through the worst. But the men are expecting a wave to-night. And you know what that means with cholera where morale's everything. It's all that dam fakir."

From the tent behind him there came a little merry cry. He turned and stared.

Through the tent-door he could see Marion on her knees stirring water in a little tub, and Lal Singh pouring from an earthen ewer.

"Mrs. Oliver!" aghast.

Marion appeared in the door, wearing an apron, her sleeves rolled up, and Bobs naked and kicking in her arms.

There was amusement on her face.

"Hullo, Dr. Ward!"

The doctor gaped, fascinated and with hanging jaw.

"What about my baby!" cried Marion. "Not a whimper the whole night through."

"Good for him!" said Puffing Billy, and going across poked the child in his creased side. "Hullo, old lad!"

Bobs met the attack with screams of happy laughter. Puffing Billy was a great friend of his.

"Well, I never!" said Watch-an Ward. "You're a brave man, Colonel."

The other laughed.

"I wasn't asked," he said. "I was ordered. She made me. Wouldn't take no. Moral effect, she said."

"And by Jove! she's right too," muttered Pollok. All down the line heads were peeping out watching. From every tent issued a sound of chattering like starlings in a chimney and the words *memsahib* and *baba* were repeated endlessly. "Heark to em! This *is* a change from yesterday." He turned to his brother-officers.

"It's a miracle," said Puffing Billy.

"And there's the worker of it," put in the doctor solemnly.

Bobs, slippery in his mother's arms, began to kick and writhe and holloo.

"He wants his bath," Marion explained. "His ayah's not here. So I'm in charge."

"Can I help, Mrs. Oliver?" asked Puffing Billy eagerly. "I'm used to puppies."

Marion laughed and declined.

"No, thank-you, Mr. Dagleish. Lal Singh's my very efficient aide."

A native regiment, if it rattles far more quickly than a British regiment, rallies far more quickly too.

All through the heat of the day Pank's Punjabis slept like tired children. The only soul in camp who seemed awake was the merry Bobs. He in truth had little need of sleep ; and gave tongue vociferously at times, especially when Lal Singh left his post for any purpose.

During the afternoon a sepoy from time to time would emerge from his own tent, steal towards the Colonel's, and listen there, while his comrades half-hidden watched. When the prowler heard the voice of the child within he grinned at his peeping comrades, and crept back. Later as the sun began to sink others came on the same errand, surreptitiously always, in twos and threes, and squatted outside.

Then Lal Singh, Bobs in one arm, and a naked bayonet in his free hand, came to the door of the tent and waved them away.

"This fellow Lal Singh thinks he is the Burra Lat Sahib himself," growled the Jats, retiring sullenly.

"Dogs of Jats who know no gratitude," muttered Lal Singh. "The Colonel Sahib and the memsahib sleep in the inner tent after their long travail on your behalf. Would you disturb them with your monkey chatterings ? "

Once Marion was roused by the cheerful screams of her little son. She pulled aside the flap to see Lal Singh surrendering his charge to a dusty woman.

"Who is it?" asked her husband sleepily.

"The ayah."

"Good for her."

They slept again to the contented croonings of ayah and child.

It was deliciously cool, and the sun was already set, when Marion emerged from her tent, well-groomed as always.

The camp was pleasantly a-stir. In the mess-tent, the servants, silent and business-like, were laying dinner. She strolled down the lines and met Watch-an Ward already in his poshteen. He still had the half-famished look of the man on edge after a prolonged strain. Marion greeted him with quiet sympathy.

"Had a good day, Dr. Ward?"

"Capital, thank-you, Mrs. Oliver," he answered with his worn smile. "Couldn't be better. The Colonel went round the lines with his pipe after chota hazri. He sat on a sugar-box and played *Two Lovely Black Eyes*. Then he gave em a turn in the hospital lines. And men who were dying yesterday got up and danced to *D'ye ken John Peel?* It worked like a charm."

"I meant are *you* rested?" Marion insisted.

"Oh, I'm all right," the doctor answered with a little laugh.

" You look as if forty-eight hours sleep on end is what you want," said Marion.

Watch-an didn't answer her. He was listening to the hum of the camp, satisfaction on his face.

" Yesterday it was like a mortuary," he said. " Now it's like a swarm of bees. That's you, Mrs. Oliver—you and Bobs. How is he?"

" In the seventh heaven. His ayah turned up about four. Took the last train from Peshawar last night. And got a lucky lift in a tonga from Khushalgarh. Not a bad effort for a Marathi?"

" Who looked after him during the day?" asked the doctor amused.

" Why Lal Singh and Puffing Billy between em," said Old For-ever joining them. " They had a free fight outside my tent as to who was to hold his hand. So I told em I wanted some sleep and asked em to take it outside."

It was a cheery party who sat down to mess.

Outside the tent the band gathered and played.

" Dr. Ward looks a ghost still," Marion remarked to her neighbour, the second-in-command.

" I don't wonder," Major Pollok replied. " The whole weight of the battle has fallen on him."

" We must put him under lock and key to-night whatever happens," said Marion.

" By Jove, you're right, Mrs. Oliver. But he's looking happier than he's looked since the trouble began."

Just then the orderly officer entered.

" Anything doing? " asked Old For-ever.

" Nothing sir—thank heaven. They're all as merry as crickets. The Jats are squatting three-deep round your tent saying *Shabash! Shabash!* every time Bobs holloas for his bottle. And the Sikhs are all listening to Lal Singh's account of the number of budmashes he slew with his own hands on the way through the Pass. So peace is assured for the time being."

Watch-an nodded contentedly.

" If there isn't a wave to-night we're through," he said.

" And there won't be a wave," came Marion's calm voice from the end of the table.

CHAPTER XXXV

DUSK

JUST then there was a ripple of laughter outside and a stir of running feet.

Puffing Billy went to the door and joined in.

"O, *do* come!" he yelled.

"What is it?" asked his Colonel lazily.

Puffing Billy plunged out and was back in a moment.

"One bunniah, sir, as per invoice, returned with love and compliments by Ibrahim Khan.

The whole party moved to the door.

A small plump man, perched upon a small donkey, was being led by a grinning Pathan down the mainway towards the mess-tent. He was still wearing the crimson turban of the Kizilbash trader with whose caravan he had been captured, and a blue surtouf with velvet collar and cuffs. On his forehead was a caste-mark, and in his ears heavy gold rings. He was pursy, aggressive, and aggrieved. Directly he saw the sahibs in the door he began his tale in a shrill excited scream—his doings, his darrings, his losses, and above all, his tortures. Into details of the latter he entered at the top of his voice and with many rhetorical flourishes.

Marion retired swiftly into the tent.

"I never saw a man they'd done that to look as well as that after it," his Colonel muttered in the doctor's ear. "Say you'll examine him."

The bunniah refused the suggestion with shrieks. Was every such a shameful request made in the history of Hind? Unveil before the sahib!—He would not do such a thing before the mother who bore him! Never, never, while Ganges water flowed! It was contrary to his race and creed.

"But see thou, sahib!" wagging a fat finger. "I am a British subject and I shall want compensation—much—very much of it. So will my wife. For I have lost my all—my caravan, my manhood, my izzat. My face has been blackened, and my name made a mock of before all men, so that all the boys in the bazaar will run after me and call me thou knowest what as I pass down the street. And that will be bad for business."

Old For-ever retired into the tent.

"He's all right, my dear," he told Marion comfortably. "Had the fright of his life. That's all."

After mess the party strolled round the lines. Lal Singh walked in front with a blazing tree-root for torch. Tom-toms were beating, and dusky faces crowded round log-fires fed with tamarisk branches. Here men were taking a suck at a common huka. Others were strumming on primitive stringed instruments, chaunting in their flat voices. An Afriti sepoy was singing

about the sorrows of an imprisoned nightingale, his audience joining in and clapping their hands.

Old For-ever, Marion, and the officers passed among them, chaffing and bidding them good-night.

"Richard's himself again," was their Colonel's verdict.

On the fringe of the camp they came on a Sikh havildar and some sepoys listening.

Old For-ever asked what the trouble was.

"There is firing from the North, sahib," said the havildar. "The chowkidars say Kadir is raiding. But I told them *Nay*. Kadir was killed by a man of my company in single combat last night in the Pass. And they have nothing more to fear."

There was no doubt about the firing. It grew in volumes as they listened, and seemed moving nearer. There was no recurring roar of volley-firing; but the scattered shots of a running fight.

"It's Thal-way," said Old For-ever. "But it's not Thal. Too near. Some village this side catching it."

"I wonder if we shall be called out," said Puffing Billy.

"It wouldn't be a bad thing if we were," remarked his Colonel.

"Not by no means," echoed Pollok.

The firing died away.

When they broke up for the night Old For-ever announced that he would be on duty.

"I've had my whack of sleep," he said. "You

fellows can turn in. You've done your share. I shall just mouch around. I'll call you Watch-an if there's any trouble."

"Yes, sir. Not that I can do much. Nobody can. But I like to be around."

"I don't think you'll be wanted," said his Colonel.

"Nor do I," said Marion, as she ran her arm through her husband's. "Good-night all."

The camp slept. A restless sepoy peeping out of his tent saw the tall figure of his Colonel prowling up and down the lines, the collar of his poshteen turned up about his ears.

"The Colonel Sahib himself watches over us," he told his comrades in a whisper. "All is well. The Evil One cannot come nigh us. Let us sleep, brothers."

About midnight the firing from the North broke out afresh. Old For-ever went to the edge of the camp to listen. There he came on an excited group of chowkidars pointing and chattering.

"It is Kadir raiding Mohamedzai for a woman he has long been after," they told the sahib.

Then a man on a white horse, plainly seen in the moonlight, spurted out of the shadow of the hills and came bucketing furiously across the plain.

He proved to be a lumbadar from the raided village, and brought a note from the Deputy-Commissioner who happened to be in camp near by asking urgently for help. The Hassan Khel were on the frolic.

They had looted the bunniah's store, so the lumbadar told Old For-ever, cut the bunniah's throat, and were carrying off cattle and grain.

"Shall I go, sir?" said a voice at Old For-ever's heels.

It was Puffing Billy.

"No, you go back to bed. But look in on the guard-tent on your way and tell em to turn out the Jat company. Parade in marching order outside the armoury tent in ten minutes. No bugles. I'll take em myself. We shan't do any good. But it's a diversion and will help us if it don't help the village."

He trotted back to his tent. There he slipped into his Jodhpores and buckled on his revolver. Marion roused.

"Hullo, Tom?"

"It's nothing, dear," he answered. "Only a raid."

Then he peeped round the screen behind which Bobs and the ayah were sleeping.

He bent over the child.

"By Jove, how that lad sleeps!" he laughed low. "Goodbye, darling." He kissed her.

"Goodbye. Good luck."

Outside she heard a horse's feet. A syce had brought up her husband's charger. She watched him mount, and heard him trot away down the lines.

A thought, like a lightning flash, shot across her mind—that thought which is the day-and-night companion of white women who dwell beyond the Indus: Should she ever see her Tom again?

With an effort she threw it off and slept.

CHAPTER XXXVI

DARK

AN hour later she was roused by somebody fumbling about in the tent.

The ayah was moving behind the screen by the light of a candle.

"What is it, ayah?" she asked.

It was some time before the woman answered in her metallic voice,

"It is Bobs baba, memsahib. I heard him give a little cry. And I do not like the look of him."

Marion was out of bed in a moment, and leaning over the cot, her hair loose about her shoulders. White woman and brown bent above the child, the latter holding the candle in her hand.

Bobs was crying in his sleep. His little face was crumpled and tears stood on it.

"Hold the candle lower," said Marion sharply.

The child was obviously uneasy; about to wake she thought. And it seemed to her discerning eye that there was something curious about his face dimly seen though it was in the light of the swaling candle. Then he woke with

a startled cry as though he had been stabbed, and beat his body with both little fists. His eyes stared up at the two women. There was terror in them and pain.

Marion lifted him in her arms.

"What is it, my precious?" she cooed, dandling him.

He gave the baffled little roar, ending in a whimper, so familiar to both the women when he was in pain, and could not understand, could not explain.

The banging up and down with his fists continued.

There was something appealing about the action, something appalling in its impotence, its furious futility. Then the screaming stopped suddenly. He gasped, he puffed, he clutched himself with chubby hands. Some hideous struggle was going on in the depths of his little body. He was being torn to death. And the shock of it had struck him dumb. His breath came in stops and starts. Then he went into convulsions and began to vomit.

"It is cholera," whispered the ayah. "I have seen it. My baba will die."

Marion flashed a fierce look at her. That look said—*He shan't*; and *Don't wail*. It was characteristic of her that even in that moment she could think for her husband and the regiment as well as for her boy. But the warning was unnecessary. Where her baba was concerned the brown woman could show courage and restraint second only to that of the white.

"Heat water!" ordered Marion. "Fill the hot-water bottles!"

The child was cold, shivering now. She undid her night-dress and laid him against her bosom.

Then an urgent voice spoke outside the tent.

"Memsahib!"

"Who is it?"

"Lal Singh. Shall I fetch the Doctor Sahib?"

A moment Marion paused. What could the doctor do? What could anybody do? Had she not been through it all before in her father's compound with the bearer's child in '74 at the time of the visitation of Dera Ismail Khan?

Besides there was the regiment.

"No," she said. "Run, Lal Singh, and get matches! Go quietly and tell no one."

He was gone and back in a moment.

"Come in," Marion bade him. "Help the ayah to light the spirit-lamp! Put the kettle on! Do thou, Lal Singh, hold the blanket about the flame to make a little tent and shelter it so that it burns brightly."

By the light of the flickering candle, the three wrestled. The child was growing worse. After his first flurry of despair he seemed to settle down into a kind of coma.

Marion held him tightly as though refusing to let him go. But he was shrivelling away in her arms, escaping her like water that evaporates. She fought almost mechanically, doing the right thing and unaware that she was doing it. More vividly alert than ever she had

been in her life she was yet stone-dead. Her spirit was a white flame burning behind obscured glass. She was being fascinated by the python that was crushing her heart to death.

Sitting on the bed, she fought, her baby in her lap, changing his flannels, massaging his spasm-seized little stomach with deft and tender hands. And the ayah, kneeling at her feet, dumb as her mistress and as desperate, fought too, amazingly resourceful and expert in her ministrations.

Then Marion was aware of a man with a lantern bending over, and a hushed voice that said,

“ Poor chap ! ”

She looked up.

“ Dr. Ward ! Who told you ? ”

“ Lal Singh. He woke my orderly, who woke me.”

The doctor took the child in his arms. Marion surrendered him without a protest, and leaned back on the bed exhausted. Then she saw the face of the man bending over her son ; and that was enough.

“ I knew it,” she said with a catch. “ You needn’t tell me.”

She went to the tent-door and looked out. Dawn was at hand.

“ I *wish* Tom would come,” she cried.

Then the quiet tents, gathered about her like a crowd of hives under the brilliant night, reminded her where she was and why.

“ How is the regiment ? ” she asked.

"Perfect," the doctor answered. "I haven't been called to-night—till now."

Bobs began to wail, and the wailing was weak and growing weaker, as of a child lost in a forest and always drawing further away into the impenetrable deeps.

Marion turned back into the tent and held out her arms.

"Let me," she said—"at the last."

Tenderly he laid the wisp of baby, fatally quiet now, in her arms. The eyes of the man and woman met.

Outside an ox lowed. The transport animals began to stir. The first faint light filtered through the darkness.

Barefoot and stately Marion stole to the door of the tent and stood there, her baby in her arms. The light grew about her and fell on the face of the child, who seemed sleeping, almost at peace.

As it did so Bobs gave a little whimper, stretched out both arms as though to grasp the coming dawn, then turned his face to his mother's bosom, snuggled down, and died.

Watch-an Ward saluted and turned away. Slowly he walked off.

At the far end of the camp there was a stir. The Jat company were coming back from their patrol with two prisoners and a dead comrade.

The Colonel was hacking quietly down between the lines, towards the doctor, his eyes about him. He was obviously pleased.

"Any deaths?" he asked, drawing rein.

Watch-an Ward halted.

"One, sir," he said.

Old For-ever drew a deep breath and dismounted. Then he looked up the lines in the twilight.

Marion had not stirred. She stood in the door of the tent, tall as a lance and as straight, her dead babe in her arms, and the light falling on her face and his. Framed thus, her long white gown trembling in folds about her bare feet, she looked in her immobility, her simplicity, her austere beauty, like the spirit of her race.

Her stillness and her calm moved the man walking towards her as the sight of the well-beloved dead moves the living. He was lifted up above the world. This was the moment of revelation. Now he understood the message of Calvary, flashed across the darkness. The whole burthen of humanity, its sorrows, its suffering, had fallen suddenly upon his shoulders. And he could bear it! He walked proudly as on clouds.

Then he raised his eyes and saw the woman before him. The pride departed and the dream with it. He came back to earth. Marion! . . .

He stopped and drew his hand across his brow as though to wipe away a reality that was binding him, or an illusion of which he would be free.

Then he came towards her haltingly.

She saw his doubt, and made a step towards him.

"It was worth it, Tom," she said.

She lifted her lips to his, and threw back the lace frill of her gown that had fallen over the face of the dead child.

He bent and kissed her on the forehead: he kissed his son.

"My dears," he said.

CHAPTER XXXVII

DAWN

THEY were turning back into the tent when the ayah, her face streaming tears, touched Marion's arm and pointed.

A wonderful thing was coming to pass: such a miracle as all men know happened often of old in the dewy dawn of the world, when all was loveliness and radiance and youth; and such a miracle as men no longer expect in the dust and disillusionment of to-day.

From every tent all along the lines men were issuing in the half light. They came pouring swiftly down the main-way; an ever-growing stream fed by rivulets, with a little rustle as of wings; whispering as they came.

Onward they flowed towards the white man and woman awaiting them; and then suddenly stayed as though some invisible hand had halted them. They salaamed; they bowed; they fell down. Some lay prostrate, their foreheads in the dust, some kneeled with lifted faces and hands plastered on their bosoms; while the men of the Jat patrol, dusty from their night-march, and still in uniform, stood up like pillars out of the kneeling host, presenting arms before

the tall sahib and the white-gowned memsahib with the dead babe grouped in the door of the tent.

In the silence from the praying multitude came a murmur, subdued and deep, like the sighing of a forest—*Wah! Wah!*

Then one man rose up from amidst the many, and he the tallest of them all. It was the Subadar-Major. He mounted on the big drum that lay before the mess-tent, and he looked inspired as his Colonel had often seen him in the height of the battle.

“O, regiment of many races,” he called in slow sonorous voice, raising his hand as one about to preach. “Hearken! To-day are we made one by the blood of innocence. The Chota Sahib has died that we may live. The cholera has passed away.”

He flung back his poshteen and laid his hand upon the hilt of the sword hidden beneath it.

“He has died for us even as the Burra Lat Yuzuf, the God of the Sahib-log of whom the Padres talk, died for the sins of the world on that first day on the Cross.”

He ripped his sword out of the sheath with a magnificent sweep and stood at the salute, the hilt pressed against his lips.

“I salute the Chota Sahib!”

Then he swung the blade over his head with a joyous rippling motion, incredibly swift, so that it seemed he was juggling with the stars and keeping them at play on his flashing point; and as he did so he sent his voice clarion-clear,

ringing out of the camp, over the rousing fields, till it struck the barren hills and came bounding back—

“ *Bobs Buhadur! Baba ki Jai!* - (Victory to the babe !) ”

In after years, Watch-an Ward, telling the story as he sometimes would in the hallowed evening to his intimates, would always end it in the same way.

“ MaharaJ Singh was right. Bobs Baba was the last man in the regiment to die.”

THE END

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